The New Criterion

December 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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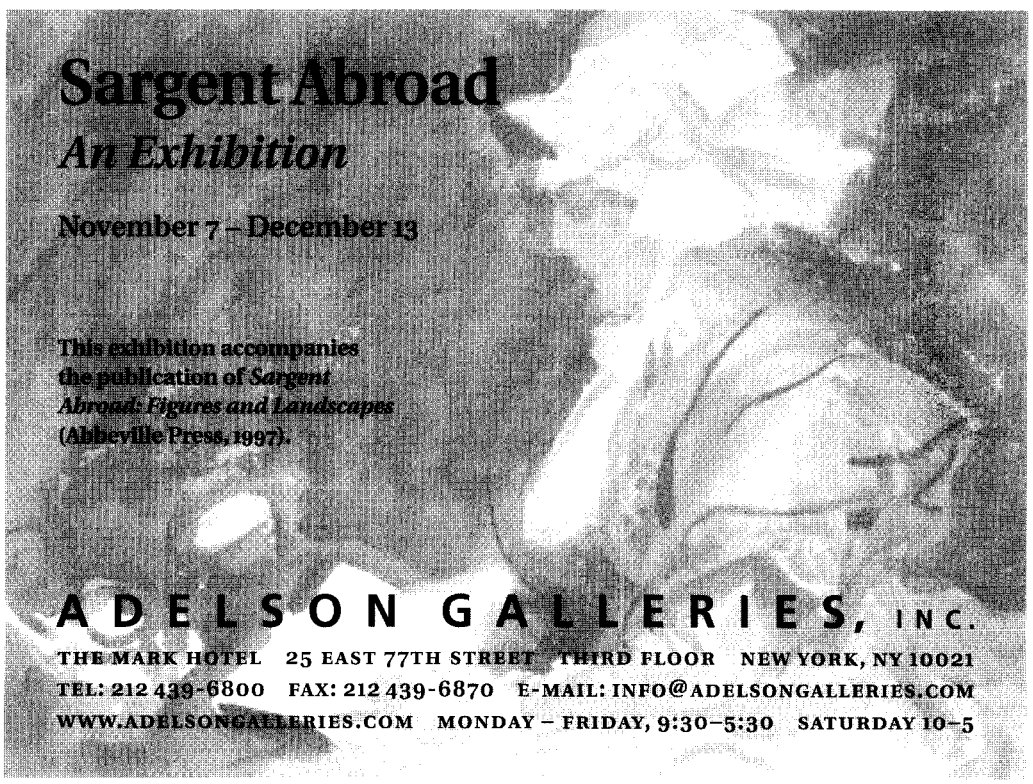
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The New Criterion *December 1997*

Editor & Publisher *Hilton Kramer*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Associate Editor *David Yezzi*
Assistant to the Editors *Francesca Marx*
Editorial Intern *Maxwell Watman*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

David Cohen is an independent art critic based in London.

Jessica Hornik's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Yale Review*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Laura Jacobs reviews dance regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Roger Kimball's essay in this issue is the fourth in his series on America's cultural revolution.

Tess Lewis's translation of *Once Again for Thucydides*, by Peter Handke, is forthcoming from New Directions.

Donald Lyons is the theater critic of *The Wall Street Journal* and the author of *Independent Visions* (Ballantine).

David Mermelstein writes about classical music for *The New York Times*.

Jonathan Musgrove is a poet living in Baltimore.

Mario Naves reviews art regularly for *The New Criterion*.

James F. Penrose reviews music regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Ronald Radosh is the author, with Harvey Klehr, of *The Amerasia Spy Case: Prelude to McCarthyism* (University of North Carolina Press).

John Simon reviews theater for *New York* magazine and films for *National Review*.

Mark Steyn is the film critic of the London *Spectator*.

Jenny Teichman recently retired from teaching philosophy at New Hall, Cambridge.

Karen Wilkin's latest book is *Cézanne*, part of the Tiny Folio series published by Abbeville Press.

James Wolcott is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*.

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Notes & Comments: December 1997

Intellectual frontiers?

Readers of our November issue will recall that we provided a preview of two "academic" conferences that took place recently at the State University of New York at New Paltz, "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom" on November 1 and "Subject to Desire: Refiguring the Body" the following weekend. In the event, both conferences generated enormous public outcry, and with good reason. Masquerading as exercises in innovative scholarship, they were really celebrations of sexual perversity laced with antinomian politics. "Revolting Behavior" included sessions devoted to subjects like "Sex Toys for Women," "How to Get What You Want in Bed" (an "interactive workshop"), "Queer Sexuality: A Spectrum of Women's Experience," and "Safe, Sane & Consensual S/M: An Alternate Way of Loving." "Subject to Desire" offered similar fare, including "Vulva's Morphia," an installation by the "performance artist" Carolee Schneemann, best known for "Interior Scroll," an act in which she slowly unravels a scroll from her vagina and reads aloud from it to the audience.

Confronted by critics who didn't think this was the very best use of tax dollars, the president of SUNY New Paltz, Roger Bowen, noted that such events were simply "business as usual." No doubt he is right: but is that a good thing? Mr. Bowen disparaged his critics as "philistines" and bleated loudly about infringements on "academic freedom" and "free speech." Governor George Pataki of New York, outraged that the administration of a state-funded college should condone such events, wasn't buying this: "This has nothing to do with free speech and everything to do with the proper expenditure of tax dollars."

Governor Pataki was right. Roger Bowen, a political radical held over from the 1960s, now finds himself in charge of a college campus. When no one is looking, he lends enthusiastic support to events like "Revolting Behavior," hoping that they will further his dream of radical political transformation. At the first hint of criticism, he has one all-purpose mantra: FREESPEECHANDACADEMICFREEDOM. (Though he does not apply this mantra to everyone: when president of Hollins College, Mr. Bowen was a vigorous supporter of speech codes.)

It goes without saying that this mantra is dear to the heart of *The New York Times*, whose editorial position on such matters has long been a model of left-liberal orthodoxy. In a brief editorial called "Free Speech at New Paltz" that appeared November 11, the *Times* blustered its support of Roger Bowen and decried the "rigid conservatives" who are calling for his dismissal. "Any university that explores intellectual frontiers," the *Times* editorialist wrote, "will

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inevitably raise hackles from some part of the political or ideological spectrum."

Intellectual frontiers? Consider the pamphlet called "Safer Sex Handbook for Lesbians," which was freely available at one of the twenty-odd workshops (we forget whether it was at "Eroticizing Safer Sex" or "Safe Sex for Women Who Partner with Women"). Like most such documents, this is a graphic how-to manual pretending to be an aid to public health. It featured explicit instructions (accompanied by photographs and unprintably crude language) on performing all manner of sex acts, including a section on "Blood Letting Sexual Activities: Cutting Rituals, Play, and Permanent Piercings, Shavings."

When the SUNY undergraduates at New Paltz got tired of exploring the "intellectual frontiers" opened up for them by the "Safer Sex Handbook for Lesbians," they could wander over to the workshop on "Sex Toys for Women." Intellectual frontiers were being further expanded at this workshop by the owner of a New York sex boutique, who provided a show-and-tell demonstrating the use of various sexual appliances. Students who wished to continue their studies at home or in the dorm were in luck. All the devices demonstrated in "Sex Toys for Women" were on sale in the main lobby, right across from the table full of pornographic and semi-pornographic books, also for sale. Those who wanted to explore their intellectual frontiers another time could pick up the fully illustrated mail-order catalogue.

In fact, there was a great deal of what *The New York Times* described as exploring intellectual frontiers at SUNY New Paltz. At the workshop on sadomasochism, four long-time practitioners of S&M were imported from Manhattan to discuss what we might call the ins and outs of their sexual activities. Noting that they had been asked by college officials to refrain from being too graphic in their presentation, they several times invited audience members to see them after the session for more information, including information about joining S&M clubs. What was billed as an educational event seemed at times more like a recruiting effort.

The New York Times would have its readers believe that the debate over these events at SUNY New Paltz has pitted champions of free speech against censorious right-wingers. "The Pataki administration endangered both free speech and academic freedom when it joined in an attack on the State University of New York at New Paltz," the *Times* intoned. "To foreclose a topic because it makes people uncomfortable is to abdicate the university's role as a forum for free and open exchange." A free and open exchange of what, pray tell? The truth is that the events at SUNY New Paltz have nothing to do with the free and open exchange of ideas and everything to do with a form of politicized sexual propaganda and proselytization.

Accordingly, the real question is not what students and faculty are legally allowed to say or do in public, but how well the campus of a great state university is meeting its primary educational obligations. Like Roger Bowen, the *Times* wants us to believe that every moral objection can be disarmed by simply invoking the talisman of free speech. This is the counsel of moral idiocy. We do not hire our educational leaders to be cultural guerrilla warriors, testing the limits of permissible behavior. On the contrary, we want a college president to articulate a vision of educational achievement and what counts as the good life. A college president who encourages his students to explore the fringes of morality instead of calling on them to become educated and responsible adults is not doing his job. The issue is not what is legally permissible but what is educationally appropriate. "Revolting Behavior" notwithstanding, American colleges are not yet laboratories dedicated to exploring the nether reaches of morality. They are institutions entrusted with the education of

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young adults. Blind to this distinction, Mr. Bowen has failed disastrously in carrying out his presidential responsibilities. Some critics have called for Mr. Bowen's dismissal. They are right to have done so. He is a disgrace to his office.

Meanwhile, back at Yale . . .

Connoisseurs of academic fatuousness will remember the debacle of Lee Bass's twenty-million-dollar grant to Yale University. In 1991, Mr. Bass, a 1979 Yale alumnus, made this extraordinary gift to his alma mater in order to strengthen Yale's offerings in Western civilization and to provide an alternative to the radical multiculturalism that has had such a disfiguring influence on the humanities in American colleges and universities. The inspiration for Mr. Bass's gift came partly from the eminent Yale classics professor Donald Kagan, a former dean of Yale College and an avid supporter of what is best in the traditional liberal arts curriculum.

Naturally, this educational initiative, emphasizing the importance of Western culture and its intellectual, moral, and political achievements met with fierce resistance from entrenched radical elements at Yale. Years went by, and nothing was done to implement the integrated course of studies or make the faculty appointments that Mr. Bass's grant had stipulated. Mr. Bass made inquiries and was met by equivocations. Finally, in 1995, he asked to be given a voice in making faculty appointments to the program he was paying for. Yale refused, and returned his grant.

Radical faculty members at Yale barked about Mr. Bass's efforts to interfere with their academic freedom, and *The New York Times*—"Old Reliable"—weighed in with an editorial supporting Yale and, by implication, attacking Lee Bass for being meddlesome. "Universities," the *Times* said, "must . . . resist the temptation to solicit and accept gifts from donors with a strong political agenda." (What they meant, of course, was a conservative agenda: strong liberal agendas are OK. Readers interested in the details of this saga should see our Notes & Comments for April 1995.)

But it turns out that the story wasn't over when Yale returned Mr. Bass's check. The affair was widely publicized in the press, and concerned alumni and members of the Yale Corporation naturally pressed the administration for an explanation of what had happened. The official answer, mouthed by Yale president Richard Levin, was that the program to be funded by the Bass grant hadn't worked out for the "practical, logistical, and nonpolitical reason that it made inefficient use of our faculty resources." Dubious, the Yale Corporation authorized an investigation of the whole affair by Federal Judge José A. Cabranes and Henry B. Schacht, CEO of the Lucent Corporation—and then kept the results secret, even from the Basses.

There was obviously something fishy happening. And, as *The Wall Street Journal* reported in an editorial on November 10, alumni from the class of 1937 have conducted their own investigation and have circulated a report that challenges Yale's assurances about its commitment to teaching Western civilization: "The university continues to reject endowments and Bass-like programs that would support such teaching—while at the same time it has expanded its multiculturalist offerings. The report further notes that with the suppression of the Cabranes-Schacht study, university officials 'continue to obscure the truth about a breach of a basic fiduciary responsibility.'" Indeed. It is said that Perry Bass, the family patriarch, has been contemplating a gift to Yale in the neighborhood of $500 million. Perhaps the administration's lack of candor about the spread of trendy multiculturalism at Yale will make him change his plans. Who could blame him?

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Reflections on a cultural revolution: IV

The marriage of Marx & Freud

by Roger Kimball

It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct.
—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

I will not give up on Paradise.
—Paul Goodman, *Five Years*

Lust strives to become intellectualized, the concrete operations of the flesh are blended with decorous abstractions, human loves tend toward the impossibilities of angelic embraces. Magic and pseudo-mysticism . . . become so many spices which are used to give a new taste to the well-known feast of the senses.
—Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*

One of the most conspicuous features of the cultural revolution that swept through America and Western Europe in the 1960s was the demand for sexual liberation. In some respects, of course, this demand was not new. The revolt against traditional sexual mores had been an important ingredient of advanced thinking at least since the 1920s. In essentials, it can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and the Romantic cult of feeling and spontaneity. Even the union of sexual liberation and radical politics—a hallmark of the 1960s—had important antecedents going back to such disparate apostles of liberation as Rousseau, Fourier, Blake, and Shelley.

Nevertheless, the Sixties were different. First of all, there was the matter of numbers. In the past, movements for sexual liberation had been sporadic and confined largely to a bohemian elite. In the 1960s—partly because of the perfection of the birth control pill and other reliable forms of contraception, partly because of greater affluence and mobility—sexual liberation suddenly became an everyday fact of middle-class life. What had been a fringe phenomenon became the established norm. There was also the matter of political rhetoric and quasi-philosophical baggage. If demands for sexual liberation were a regular, if not invariable, concomitant of revolutionary politics in the past, seldom had sexual emancipation been invested with such a forbidding panoply of political mystification and high-flown verbiage. Plenty of revolutionary movements have made sexual emancipation one of their causes; rarely has sexual gratification so thoroughly defined the *content* of revolutionary politics.

A large part of the credit—if "credit" is the *mot juste*—for this development must go to Wilhelm Reich, the Austrian-born psychiatrist, demobbed Communist, renegade Freudian, militant atheist, and all-around champion of the beneficent effects of sexual orgasm. At the center of Reich's teachings were two convictions: that "the sexual question must be politicized," as he put it in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), and that establishing "a satisfactory genital sex life" was the key not only to individual but also to societal liberation and happiness, as

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he put it in *The Function of the Orgasm* (1942) and practically everything else he wrote. As one critic acknowledged, "Reich, in truth, did feel that sex was everything."

It has been said that when someone abandons belief in God, what he will then believe is not nothing but *anything*. Reich was one of many modern figures who would seem to confirm this observation. Reich was always obsessed with sex. By the 1940s he was potty about it. It was then that he published his theories about "cosmic orgone energy" and "orgiastic potency." He built "Orgone Energy Accumulators"—empty boxes to the rest of us—which he sold to patients so that they might mobilize their "plasmatic currents" and thereby overcome sexual repression and, incidentally, cure everything from cancer to schizophrenia. It was all nonsense, of course, and fraudulent nonsense at that: Reich spent the last years of his life in a Federal penitentiary, courtesy of the Food and Drug Administration, dying in 1957 in his sixtieth year.

Although by the end he was almost certainly mad, Reich was also immensely influential. A self-declared "Freudo-Marxist," he helped to pioneer that strange amalgam of radical politics and emancipatory sex that fueled the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Today, the familiarity of this union tends to obscure its oddness. As the political philosopher Harvey Mansfield pointed out in his essay "The Legacy of the Late Sixties" (1997), the sexual revolution depended on "an illicit, forced union between Freud and Marx in which Mr. Marx was compelled to yield his principle that economics, not sex, is the focus of liberation, and Mr. Freud was required to forsake his insistence that liberation from human nature is impossible."

As is so often the case, contradiction has proved no bar to credulity. For Reich and his disciples and spiritual heirs, sex was the primary focus of political activism, and human nature was a harsh but dispensable fiction. Reich came too soon and was too much of a quack to see his ideas triumph in their original form. But by the early 1960s, variations on his core theories about sex and politics were everywhere. Norman Mailer's infamous essay on "The White Negro" (1957), for example, with its adolescent radicalism and hymns to the "apocalyptic orgasm" is Reichean boilerplate gussied up with Mailerean bombast.

Mailer had a part to play in popularizing Reich. But the three men who really accomplished the Reichean gospel were the anarchist poet-psychologist Paul Goodman, the classicist turned neo-Freudian guru Norman O. Brown, and the Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse. None would have described himself as a follower of Reich, but all read and commented on his work. More to the point, whatever their disagreements with Reich or with each other, all absorbed the essential Reichean tenets about politicizing sex and investing it with a kind of redemptive significance. As Richard King noted in *The Party of Eros: Radical Social Thought and the Realm of Freedom* (1972), all three "sought to combine a concern for instinctual and erotic liberation with political and social radicalism, cultural with political concerns."

It would be difficult to overestimate their influence. The critic Morris Dickstein—himself a slightly tarnished Sixties radical—was quite right to insist, in *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (1977), that Goodman, Brown, and Marcuse were prime catalysts in "the rise of a new sensibility," the thinkers "whose work had the greatest impact on the new culture of the sixties." At the same time, it is worth stressing that the importance of Goodman, Brown, and Marcuse was not so much intellectual as emotional and affective. Despite the elaborate scholarly machinery they employed in their books, their chief appeal was not to people's minds but to their hearts—and to other, lower, organs. They came bearing arguments, but, as the Sixties wore on, they were increasingly acclaimed as prophets. Their ideas were embraced less as reasoned proposals than as talismans of personal and political transformation. As Dickstein put it, the trio of Goodman,

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Brown, and Marcuse spoke with such urgency to his generation because "we knew that at bottom their gospel was a sexual one, that sex was their wedge for reorienting all human relations."

Of the three, Paul Goodman (1911–1972) is the one whose reputation has faded most completely. Having graduated from City College in 1931 with a degree in philosophy, Goodman early on determined to be a writer. Today, most people familiar with Goodman's work would probably describe him as a kind of social psychologist. But in fact his literary interests—like his sexual interests, as it turned out—were extremely promiscuous. He contributed to all manner of left-wing publications, including *Partisan Review*, *Politics*, *Commentary*, *Dissent*, and *The New York Review of Books*. He wrote literary criticism (and even took a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Chicago) as well as poems, short stories, and novels; in 1951, he collaborated on a book about Gestalt psychology. He wrote essays on everything from city planning and decentralization to education, youth work camps, pornography (he was for it), Wilhelm Reich, and making antiwar films.

During World War II, Goodman's draft-dodging and anarchist views made him *persona non grata* at some of his usual outlets, and he receded somewhat from the scene. But in 1960 his big break came. Norman Podhoretz had just taken over the editorship of *Commentary*. As a declaration of editorial intention, he decided to publish three large segments of Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, the manuscript of which had just been turned down by over a dozen publishers. In his memoir *Making It* (1967), Podhoretz recalled that *Growing Up Absurd* represented "the very incarnation of the new spirit" that he wanted both for *Commentary* and for the world at large. Looking back from the mid-1970s, Morris Dickstein described the book as a "masterwork in social criticism . . . that did much to inform the whole frame of mind of thinking people in the sixties." Be that as it may, by the mid-1960s, Goodman had achieved enormous celebrity. He was an invariable participant at rallies, sit-ins, protest marches, and other events sure to attract large numbers of young men. "Like Allen Ginsberg," Dickstein noted, "Goodman was more than a writer in the sixties: he was a pervasive and inescapable *presence*. . . . the most tireless and incandescent Socratic figure of the age."

Today, it is hard to recapture the excitement. For one thing, Goodman's prose is atrocious. "Encountering Goodman's style," Norman Mailer once observed, "was not unrelated to the journeys one undertook in the company of a laundry bag." The critic Kingsley Widmer in *Paul Goodman* (1980), a monograph designed to outline Goodman's achievement, regularly comments on his subject's deficiencies as a writer. Of his literary works generally Widmer observes that, "pathetically, they are often quite literally incompetent—marked by trite and mangled language, bumblingly inconsistent manners and tones, garbled syntax and forms, embarrassing pretentiousness and self-lugubriousness, and pervasive awkward writing."

In a curious way, however, some of Goodman's failings as a stylist actually contributed to his effectiveness. Goodman had a knack for reformulating current anxieties and clichés in the astringent language of the social sciences. This had the double advantage of imbuing his sociological writings with an aura of authority while reinforcing his readers' settled prejudices—a tactic sure to inspire gratitude. He managed the neat trick of balancing pathos and jargon in such a way that—for those susceptible to his spell—the underlying banality of his thinking momentarily disappeared.

By the time that *Growing Up Absurd* was published, Goodman's main point was wearisomely familiar: postwar America was a conformist wasteland that stifled anything beginning with the letter *s*—spirit, spontaneity, self-expression, and of course sexuality. Goodman said virtually nothing new in *Growing Up Absurd*. But somehow, his method of recycling received opinions about the problems of youth culture in

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what he liked to call the "Organized System" struck a chord. His success was due partly to the way he combined the radical clichés of the moment with a traditional language of virtue. "My purpose is a simple one," Goodman wrote in his first chapter: "to show how it is desperately hard these days for an average child to grow up to be a man, for our present organized system of society does not want men." (Girls and women do not figure much in Goodman's scheme of things.)

In other words, Goodman cannily blended rhetoric appropriate to a Marine recruitment poster with portentous fantasies about America being an "unnatural system" that warps young souls. Given current conditions in America, Goodman wonders, "Is it possible, being a human being, to exist? Is it possible, having a human nature, to grow up?" But the pertinent question is whether it really *was* "desperately hard" for an average child to grow up in the United States in the 1950s—an era of tremendous prosperity, excellent public education, potent national self-confidence. Was it true, as Goodman insisted, that "the young men who conform to the dominant society become for the most part apathetic, disappointed, cynical, and wasted"?

Part of Goodman's purpose was to sympathize with and exonerate those elements of youth culture that had chosen *not* to conform to "the dominant society"—the Beats and other fringe groups who believed that "a man is a fool to work to pay installments on a useless refrigerator for his wife." (Not so useless if one wishes to keep food from spoiling, of course, but Goodman never acknowledges that side of things.) He praises the Beats for being "pacific, artistic, and rather easy-going sexually." Indeed, as one reads through *Growing Up Absurd*, it becomes increasingly clear that being "easy going" when it comes to sex is one of his chief criteria of psychological health. "My impression is," he writes in one gnomic passage, "that—leaving out their artists, who have the kind of sex that artists have—Beat sexuality in general is pretty good, unlike delinquent sexuality, which seems, on the evidence, to be wretched." (What "kind of sex" does Goodman think artists have? He never says.)

As Richard King observed in *The Party of Eros*, Goodman's works "reveal a man obsessed with two things—sex and general ideas." Although he had two common-law wives and fathered three children, Goodman was aggressively bi-sexual, which meant—as his diary, *Five Years* (1966), makes clear—predominantly homosexual. His sexual behavior was so flagrant that he managed to get himself dismissed from teaching positions at a progressive boarding school and even from that bohemian outpost of the South, Black Mountain College. He seems to have been obtuse as well as importunate. "I distrust women clothed," he wrote in his diary. "Naked, they are attractive to me like any other animal. Male dress passes—but I have to reach for their penises, to make sure. This has damaged my reputation." Imagine that! *Five Years* records a steady stream of one-night stands, rough-trade, and hasty pick-ups in bars. "There have been few days going back to my 11th year," Goodman noted, "when I have not had an orgasm one way or another."

C. Wright Mills and P. J. Salter described one of Goodman's articles from the 1940s as putting forward "the gonad theory of revolution." In truth, Goodman propounded the gonad theory of life. As the critic Joseph Epstein put it in 1978, "the good society, for Goodman, started at the groin." Responding to Epstein's criticism, a Goodman enthusiast quoted from a letter that Goodman had written some years before: "My own view . . . is that no sexual practices whatever, unless they are malicious or extremely guilt-ridden, do any harm to anybody, including children"—a statement that not only epitomizes Goodman's philosophy, but also helps to explain why he became such an idolized figure for the counterculture of the 1960s.

To move from the work of Paul Goodman to that of Norman O. Brown is to move

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from the grubby and prosaic to the cerebral and fantastic. Born in 1913, Brown was educated at Oxford, the University of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin. A classicist by training, he labored in obscurity at Wesleyan University through the 1950s. His discovery of Freud was (to use a term he might like) a metanoia. In 1959, he published *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History*, a dense, learned academic tract that blends Freud, Marx, idealist philosophy, and mysticism East and West in a preposterous but intoxicating brew. Brown's premise, in *Life Against Death* and in his other main book, an aphoristic mélange called *Love's Body* (1966), is that there is an "intrinsic connection between social organization and neurosis." His goal is to break that connection by abolishing "repression," thus curing "the disease called man." This, you see, is the way to affirm the "life instinct," which "demands a union with others and the world around us based not on anxiety and aggression but on narcissism and erotic exuberance." To which one might respond, Nice work if you can get it.

Naturally, this sort of thing was a tremendous hit on American campuses, where the homeless radicalism of irresponsible affluence made all manner of utopian schemes seem attractive. Morris Dickstein doubtless spoke for many when he wrote, in *Gates of Eden*, that "I can recall no public event more inspiring and electrifying at that time than Brown's vatic, impassioned Phi Beta Kappa oration at Columbia in 1960." Vatic, indeed. That oration, called "Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind," published the following year in *Harper's*, is a piece of obscurantist nonsense. But what seductive nonsense it was! Brown began by declaring a state of emergency: the mind was "at the end of its tether," just as H. G. Wells had said it was. Civilization, ruined by rationality, had to be "renewed by the discovery of new mysteries" and "magic." What was needed, Brown told the newly elected key-holders, was "the blessed madness of the maenad and the bacchant." He himself came seeking "supernatural powers."

Brown's great gift was infusing mystic pronouncements with a radical, anti-bourgeois animus and a febrile erotic charge. How nice to learn, for example, that time was simply the product of "neurosis." Or that "all sublimations are desexualizations." Or that the roots of "alienated consciouness" lay in "the compulsion to work" and that this compulsion was exacerbated by "capitalism," which "has made us so stupid and one-sided that objects exist for us only if we can possess them or if they have utility." How exciting to discover that "all thinking is nothing but a detour" and that the chief task now facing the spiritual vanguard was "the construction of a Dionysian ego" that would free us from the tyranny of "genital organization." "The work of constructing a Dionysian ego is immense," Brown acknowledges, as if he were talking about the Hoover Dam, "but there are signs that it is already under way." Indeed.

Brown offered his readers a little of everything: the rhetoric of Christian eschatology *and* neo-Marxist radicalism *and* polymorphous sexuality. Was his vision of "body mysticism" littered with contradictions? No problem! Faced with contradiction one could always resort to Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)." Or one could quote Brown himself: "We may therefore entertain the hypothesis that formal logic and the law of contradiction are the rules whereby the mind submits to operate under general conditions of repression."

Brown claimed to be plumbing "the psychoanalytic meaning of history." But, as he more or less admits, Brown adopts Freudian rhetoric while totally inverting Freud's fundamental understanding of civilization and human nature. (The one thing that Brown took from Freud without distortion was Freud's extraordinary overestimation of sex as the most important thing—almost the only important thing—in human life.) The writer John Passmore, in "Paradise Now," a long article about Brown published in *En-*

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counter in 1970, summed it up well: "Freud presented a dilemma: either civilization, which rests on repression, or unrepressed enjoyment. When it came to the point he preferred civilization, if with some misgivings. Brown, in typical mystical fashion, chooses the other horn of the dilemma." In fact, the choice is not even between civilization and "unrepressed enjoyment" but rather between the ordered enjoyments that civilization makes possible and the carnage and savagery of Dionysian—i.e., barbaric—chaos.

Brown everywhere talks about "abolishing" repression: in *Love's Body*, for example he waxes prophetic about it: "The unconscious to be made conscious; a secret disclosed; a veil to be rent, a seal to be broke open; the seal which Freud called repression." He tells us that art, if it is to fulfill its redemptive function, must be "subversive of civilization." In other words, like all Romantics, Brown pretends that the alternative to civilization, with its tedious checks and balances, is paradise; in fact, as every real breakdown of civilization in history reminds us, the alternative to civilization is much closer to hell on earth.

Brown's popularity rested on two points: his promise of an ecstatic world- and self-transforming sexuality and his attack on rationality. The two go together. Sex, in the world according to Brown, has little or nothing to do with the family or children; in the end it has little to do with sex as ordinarily understood. It is more a mystical than a carnal or emotional reality. Sex for Brown is a synecdoche for spiritual redemption, though his cerebral musings about polymorphous perversity and the abolition of repression inspired a great deal of distinctly more mundane activity among his acolytes. Likewise Brown's attack on rationality. He asked his followers to dispense with "quantifying rationality" and "morbid" science whose aims were to gain "possession or mastery over objects."

> What would a nonmorbid science look like? It would presumably be erotic rather than (anal) sadistic in aim. Its aim would not be mastery over but union with nature. And its means would not be economizing but erotic exuberance. And finally, it would be based on the whole body and not just a part; that is to say, it would be based on the polymorphously perverse body.

That is to say, it would be based on a groundless fantasy about what constituted knowledge, a grotesque misunderstanding of nature, and a narcissistic worship of the body. Brown pretended that the alternative to rational thought ("formal logic," "the law of contradiction") was a "higher" knowledge. In fact, it was a lower form of ignorance: a word-besotted mysticism incapable of distinguishing verbal legerdemain from the claims of reality. It is easy to dismiss Brown as a "gnostic curiosity," as one critic did. The problem is that his gnostic fantasies seduced some of the most influential and articulate thinkers of the 1960s, and, through them, the hearts and minds of an entire generation. Take, for example, Susan Sontag's famous conclusion to "Against Interpetation": "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." This bit of avant-garde word play is totally nonsensical; but it is exactly the sort of nonsense that is inconceivable without the example of Brown's polysyllabic eroticism.

With the work of Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), we descend a little closer to earth, but not much. Born in Berlin and educated at the University of Berlin and the University of Freiburg, Marcuse began his academic career as a radical interpreter of Hegel and was associated with the so-called "Frankfurt School" of Marxist intellectuals. When the Nazis came to power, he fled first to Geneva, where he taught for a year, and then to the United States, where he remained for the rest of his life, teaching at Columbia, Harvard, Brandeis, and the University of California at San Diego. Marcuse's two most influential books, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man:*

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Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (1964), lay out a position that, in essentials, anticipates and parallels Brown's. Like Brown, Marcuse blends Marx and Freud to produce an emancipatory vision based on polymorphous, narcissistic sexuality, anti-bourgeois animus, and quasi-mystical theories about art, redemption, and the abolition of repression.

The chief difference between them is one of tone. Brown poses as a visionary: William Blake with a Ph.D. For him, the revolution is primarily a cataclysm in consciousness. Marcuse makes more of an effort to keep his Marxist credentials in good order. Where Brown might quote the mystic Jacob Boehme, Marcuse will add a "Political Preface" to *Eros and Civilization* in order to announce "the gradual undermining of capitalistic enterprise in the course of automation." Where Brown described himself as a seeker after "magic" and "supernatural powers," Marcuse became the mentor of Angela Davis, whom he described as the best student he ever taught. In 1972, in *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, Marcuse accused the "Western world" (i.e., the United States) of practicing "the horrors of the Nazi regime" and looked forward to "the fall of the capitalist superpower," an event that he believed would allow the Chinese and Cuban revolutions "to go their own ways—freed from the suffocating blockade and the equally suffocating necessity of maintaining an ever more costly defensive machine." Brown might agree, but one can hardly imagine him acknowledging the existence of Cuba without first quoting Paracelsus. In other words, both men were political simpletons, but Marcuse was more likely to insist on the real-world implications of his thought.

In a famous review of *Love's Body* published in *Commentary* in 1967, Marcuse accused Brown of systematically "mystifying" love, politics, and human nature. He was quite right, but the charge applies equally to Marcuse. Both men were fantasists. Their world view proceeds from the assumption that human nature can be repealed. In *Eros and Civilization*—a book that became a bible of the counterculture—Marcuse spins a fairytale about the fate of man in industrial society. Like Brown, he conjures up the image of a "non-repressive reality principle" in which "the body in its entirety would become . . . an instrument of pleasure." What this really amounts to is a form of infantilization. Marcuse speaks glowingly of "a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality" that "protests against the repressive order of procreative sexuality." He recommends returning to a state of "primary narcissism" in which one will find "the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death; silence, sleep, night, paradise—the Nirvana principle not as death but as life." In other words, he looks forward to a community of solipsists.

Marcuse is much more explicit than Brown about the social implications of his experiment in narcissism. "This change in the value and scope of libidinal relations," he writes, "would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family." That is to say, ultimate liberation is indistinguishable from ultimate self-absorption. Of course, there are one or two impediments to fulfilling this dream. Mortality, for example. "The brute fact of death," Marcuse admits, "denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence." But not to worry. A couple of pages after acknowledging this inconvenient reality, Marcuse assures us that the emancipation of eros means that "the instinctual value of death would have changed," and he goes on to explain that "the necessity of death does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like other necessities, it can be made rational—painless. Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion. After a fulfilled life, they may take it upon themselves to die—at a moment of their own choosing." It is sad, really, that a man so extensively educated should be so naïve.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer

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once observed that no one should read Hegel before the age of forty: the dangers of intellectual corruption were just too great. Marcuse is a case in point. He was so intoxicated by Hegel's dialectic that he could no longer register the most commonplace realities. His Marxist view of the world mandated that capitalism led to oppression, ergo capitalist societies were monuments of misery and unfreedom: Q.E.D. Never mind that the United States has developed into the most tolerant and prosperous society in history: the theory says that it can't happen, therefore what looks like freedom and prosperity must be an illusion. Marcuse's boldness in this direction is quite breathtaking. The fundamental point of *One-Dimensional Man* is that the better things appear to get, the worse they really are. "Under the rule of a repressive whole," he writes, "liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination." And again, "a rising standard of living is the almost unavoidable by-product of the politically manipulated society."

Marcuse came up with several names for the idea that freedom is a form of tyranny. The most famous was "repressive tolerance," which was also the title of an essay he wrote on the subject in 1965. He even offers a simple formula for distinguishing between the "repressive tolerance" that expresses itself in such phenomena as freedom of assembly and free speech and the "liberating tolerance" he recommends. "Liberating tolerance," he writes, "would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left." What Marcuse wants is "not 'equal' but *more* representation of the Left," and he blithely sanctions "extralegal means if the legal ones have proved to be inadequate." Marcuse admits that "extreme suspension of the right of free speech and free assembly is indeed justified only if the whole of society is in extreme danger," but he goes on to note that "I maintain that our society is in such an emergency situation."

> Different opinions and "philosophies" can no longer compete peacefully for adherence and persuasion on rational grounds: the "marketplace of ideas" is organized and delimited by those who determine the national and the individual interest. In this society, for which the ideologists have proclaimed the "end of ideology," the false consciousness has become the general consciousness—from the government down to its last objects.

No wonder Leszek Kolakowski concluded that Marcuse's philosophy advocated "Marxism as a Totalitarian Utopia." In the end, Kolakowski points out, Marcuse's entire system "depends on replacing the tyranny of logic by a police tyranny. . . . The Marcusian union of Eros and Logos can only be realized in the form of a totalitarian state, established and governed by force; the freedom he advocates is non-freedom."

The ideas put forward by people like Paul Goodman, Norman O. Brown, and Herbert Marcuse are so extravagant that one is tempted to dismiss them as ridiculous figments of a diseased understanding. The problem is that these figments, deceptive though they undoubtedly are, have been extolled as liberating wisdom by an entire generation. If they are no longer declared with the same proselytizing fervor that they were in the 1960s, that is because they have become part of the established intellectual and moral climate we live with. The unlikely marriage of Marx and Freud shows that it is a great mistake to believe that ideas, because untrue or even preposterous, cannot therefore do great harm. As the political commentator Irving Kristol points out in "Utopianism, Ancient and Modern," "the truth is that ideas are *all*-important. The massive and seemingly solid institutions of any society . . . are always at the mercy of the ideas in the heads of the people who populate these institutions." Goodman, Brown, and Marcuse promised boundless liberation. What they delivered was mystification and immorality. Edmund Burke was right: "liberty must be limited in order to be possessed."

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The blacklist as history

by Ronald Radosh

Remembering the martyrs of the 1950s blacklist has become an occasion for annual celebration by the survivors and the sympathizers of that period of turmoil in old Hollywood. But the fiftieth anniversary of the blacklist this October was something special, and Hollywood is going all out to commemorate the event. Frank Tarloff, an eighty-two-year-old blacklisted writer, leads the First Amendment-Blacklist Project, which is funding public art related to the period by Jenny Holzer. Public Radio is airing a drama titled "The Waldorf Conference," a recreation by the actors Ed Asner, Charles Durning, and Shelley Berman of the meeting at the Waldorf-Astoria in which industry leaders issued an edict that Communists, and those who refused to cooperate with the House Committee, be dismissed from employment. Turner Classic Movies aired films and documentaries on the blacklist, and the industry itself sponsored events. On October 27, the four major guilds hosted "Hollywood Remembers the Blacklist," an anniversary commemoration at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, featuring film clips, old newsreels, as well as dramatic readings of HUAC testimony performed by Kevin Spacey, James Woods, Alfre Woodard, Billy Crystal, and John Lithgow. And currently, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is offering "Red Hollywood," a month-long series of the films of blacklisted artists. There are also numerous oral histories, personal memoirs, and even additional television documentaries.

It goes without saying that no dissenting voices are welcome. When the screenwriter Walter Bernstein published his paean to the party line, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (Knopf, 1996), it received scores of favorable reviews in the most important book review pages in our country. Sidney Lumet, Arthur Penn, Herbert Mitgang, Hume Cronyn, Arthur Miller, Paul Newman, Woody Allen, Victor Navasky, and other left-wing luminaries supplied obliging blurbs. But when Edward Dmytryk published his dissenting view of the episode, *Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten* (Southern Illinois, 1996), it was either ignored or, in the few places it was reviewed, excoriated. (Nor is it surprising that Bernstein's book should have been published by the venerable house of Alfred A. Knopf while Dmytryk's book was published by a small university press.)

For any serious student of the period, however, a comparison of the two volumes makes it clear that Dmytryk's is by far the better book. Dmytryk shows how the Communist Party apparatus in Hollywood controlled the legal and political response of the Ten after the subpoenas were issued. For example, no one was allowed to talk publicly about his Party membership. Those who were considered insufficiently "progressive"—including Dmytryk—were excluded from the Party's secret strategy ses-

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sions. Dmytryk also exposes the double-dealing and corrupt behavior that the Hollywood Reds regularly engaged in.

Having become disillusioned with Communism and the Party, and having served most of his term in prison, Dmytryk decided to release a public statement detailing his changed views. His 1950 statement said simply that "I was not a Communist or a Communist sympathizer and that I had not been a Communist at the time of the congressional hearings. It did not mention my earlier Party membership . . . and I hoped it would take me off the blacklist."

It might have, Dmytryk reports, were it not for the machinations of his comrade Herbert Biberman, who also had been released from prison. Eight of the Ten were still serving their sentences and were in the process of applying for parole. Although he was trying to distance himself from the Party when Biberman appeared unannounced at his door, Dmytryk agreed to sign a statement, but only if his words were given to the official parole board. Under no circumstances, he told Biberman, was his act of solidarity with the others to be linked to the Party or to the Hollywood Ten and its defense apparatus. Biberman readily agreed. But two days later, the Hollywood trade papers published Dmytryk's statement on their front pages, and his impending contract negotiations with studios were immediately cancelled. The message now was clear as far as Dmytryk was concerned. No longer would he act as if there was "a possibility of a decent world through Stalinism." Having been betrayed by his erstwhile comrades, Dmytryk took the next step—he consented to give names to the committee at new hearings.

Dmytryk was hardly the only one to suffer from the Party's efforts to control its writers. In 1946, the screenwriter (and future Hollywood Ten member) Albert Maltz made the mistake of opposing the Zhadanov policy of using art as a "weapon" and—even worse—of praising in print the novelist James T. Farrell. The problem was that Farrell was a Trotskyist at the time, and Maltz had argued that "writers must be judged by their work, not by the committees they join." Such displays of independence were anathema. As both Dmytryk and Bernstein recall, the Party's top literary and political figures openly and savagely attacked Maltz. Its East Coast leaders even descended on Hollywood and held two stormy meetings to condemn him. Supported by screenwriters Alvah Bessie and Hebert Biberman, the New York Party chieftains forced Maltz to recant. As Bernstein writes, Maltz "might as well have attacked Stalin. The Party fell on him like the wolf on the fold." The Party's chairman, Eugene Dennis, described Maltz's article as a "bourgeois-intellectual and semi-Trotskyist" piece. Irwin Shaw, Bernstein recalls, "asked me how I could take orders from such idiots." It is a good question, and one Bernstein fails to answer satisfactorily.

Dmytryk gives many other examples of the Party's dictatorial efforts to control its members. A case in point was the Party's treatment of Robert Rossen, a talented writer and director. Rossen had produced, written, and directed a film that is now regarded as one of the classic works of American cinema, the Oscar-winning *All the King's Men*, based on the novel by Robert Penn Warren. A noted Communist, Rossen had gained fame for his direction of John Garfield in *Body and Soul*. As Walter Bernstein acknowledges, Rossen "knew the kinetic nature of the art, the fluidity and combination of images that drove a story."

What, then, led Rossen to decide to become a friendly witness and join the ranks of those naming names? Bernstein has an easy answer. Rossen, he writes, "had no real belief larger than his ego." Dmytryk's answer is more persuasive, reminding us of the Party's brutal assault on Rossen for *All the King's Men*. Warren's novel is based on the personal dictatorship created in Louisiana by the Kingfish, Governor Huey Long. No one who has seen the film will have forgotten the frightening images of Willie Stark, the character based on Long.

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Promising the world to the poor, he created a fierce personal rule enforced by terror and bribery. Why would the Communist Party object to a film that revealed this process, especially since the Left had regularly (and incorrectly) condemned Long as an American fascist? The theme of *All the King's Men* is "power corrupts," and Dmytryk shows that Party leaders felt that Rossen's film would be seen not as an exposé of Huey Long but as a parable of Stalin's dictatorship. Rossen was exposing one-man rule, and as the Cold War was changing Americans' image of Uncle Joe, such a film could be dangerous.

As for Bernstein's *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist*, it is among other things a splendid example of retrospective literary exculpation. Bernstein's first coup as a journalist was to land an interview with Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslav Communist leader. Upon returning to New York, Bernstein reported what he had learned to top Party leaders. Indeed, he acknowledges that he was later approached by a representative of the Soviet Embassy who asked him to file a report with them. Bernstein says he declined, but felt "guilty" about declining. The recently released Venona files include a cable dated October 21, 1944, from the New York KGB stating that Bernstein had met with an agent code-named "Kahn"—most likely Avrom Landy, a liaison of the American Party between the KGB and agents connected to the CP's ethnic-group apparatus. The cable states that Bernstein "welcomed the re-establishment of liaison with him and promised to write a report on his trip by the first of November." The Venona cable does not necessarily conflict with the story Bernstein tells. As Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes write in their forthcoming book on Venona from Yale University Press, tentatively scheduled for 1999, "a more likely explanation is that Walter Bernstein . . . had provided assistance to the KGB in the past and was willing to help them in the future."

It is striking that despite years with which to recollect the past, Bernstein has learned very little. This is particularly ironic since he tells us that he has finally learned the truth about Stalinism from an old friend who recently came back into his life, the eminent historian of Stalin's terror, Robert Conquest. But what Bernstein—like so many others—has learned is only half of the truth. His book, although it now acknowledges the horrors and crimes of Communism, still reflects the views of a 1930s fellow traveler. Communists did not openly declare their views, because if they did, they would "be ostracized, certainly marginalized; you could lose your job . . . be condemned to the fringe." But as far as Bernstein was concerned, the Communists were good American patriots. They may have toed the line and rationalized everything going on in the Soviet Union, but "we believed in this America . . . we cherished its values . . . we believed ourselves good Americans." At the same time, Bernstein can write that

> we were not quite stupid enough to believe the Soviet Union was perfect, but we believed that with all its faults it still stood for a better world. It had fought and suffered beyond human reason trying to create that world. . . . Russia was strong and committed to peace. My feelings about the Soviet Union were firm, derived from Stalingrad, where the war was won, not from the gulag, where socialism was lost.

If Bernstein viewed the Soviet Union through the rose-colored glasses of sentimental socialism, he judged the United States with the harshness of a dogmatic left-wing ideologue. It was clear, he said, that "the United States had started the cold war, needed it for imperial purposes, needed the terror of a blacklist to make that war seem necessary." That such nonsense can be written today shows the limit of Mr. Bernstein's ability to look at the past with any real understanding.

A similar debility affects the writer James Lardner, son of the Hollywood Ten screenwriter Ring Lardner, Jr. Writing in *The*

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Washington Post on November 2, Lardner commented that "it is easy now to revere the 'unfriendly' witnesses who refused to testify," and he adds that at the Hollywood ceremonies honoring the blacklisted artists, "there was not a lot of talk about Stalin or Brezhnev." How, he asks, could his father and his wonderful friends "have overlooked all the ghastliness that communism was inflicting in the part of the world where it was an actual . . . working experiment?" How, he asks, could they have not understood the dangers that would occur when "a minority of sectarian zealots took power by violence, and then set out to impose their doctrine on a vast population with habits and attitudes that the doctrine deemed retrograde?"

For once, Lardner asks the right questions. But he continues to explain away the political foolishness of his father's generation. According to Lardner, Stalinism operated only in Russia; in the United States, the Communist Party did only good: "it helped create the movie unions, organized support for the loyalists in the Spanish Civil War and . . . [supported] the rights of women and blacks." With such statements, Lardner, like other red-diaper babies, provides a total whitewash of the Communist movement in America. Any responsible study of American Communism reveals a long and sordid history of its betrayal of liberalism. As Philip Murray told the Congress of Industrial Organizations convention in 1948, he opposed the Communists "because they have subverted every decent movement into which they have infiltrated themselves in the course of their unholy career." Even the socialist intellectual Irving Howe acknowledged that those loyal to the Communist Party in the heyday of Stalinism—like Mr. Lardner's father and the Ten—"helped befoul the cultural atmosphere, helped bring totalitarian methods into trade unions, [and] helped perpetuate one of the great lies of the century."

In any event, Lardner does understand that the blacklist ultimately allowed some of the Ten to free themselves from the Party's control. It is to the senior Lardner's credit, his son reveals, that unlike others of his group, his father was in favor of giving the great director Elia Kazan "one of those lifetime-achievement-type awards that have repeatedly been denied him by young Hollywood whippersnappers who weren't even alive when he knuckled under to HUAC."

Nevertheless, Lardner is wrong to suggest that it is only a new generation that continues to revile the "friendly" witnesses before HUAC. Here one only has to read the important new collection of oral history interviews of those blacklisted in Hollywood, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist*, by Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle.[1] Lardner's father may now be more forgiving, but that is not the case with the majority of his once blacklisted colleagues. (Bernstein, for example, reiterates the standard argument of the Left that Elia Kazan deserves no such achievement award, because, Bernstein says, "you can't separate Kazan's work from what he did as a friendly witness.")

As for the workings of the Party in Hollywood, some of those interviewed manage to let the cat out of the bag, sometimes with hilarious results. There is Robert Lees, a screenwriter who successfully broke into TV after the blacklist hit Hollywood, informing us how he managed to bring socialist content into the series "Lassie." "I . . . almost always had to demonstrate a lesson," Lees tells Paul Buhle and David Wagner. "Lassie finds a bone. . . . So the idea is, Lassie finally realizes . . . that the museum needs the [dinosaur] bone, and she has to learn how to share. Another dog steals the bone, and Lassie has to get it back and turn it over." To which his interviewers respond, quoting the famous line uttered by Ginger Rogers in the film *Tender Comrade*, "Or 'Share and share alike—that's democracy,' at least for *Lassie*."

On a more serious level, some of the writers interviewed give candid details of

1 *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Blacklist*, by Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle; St. Martin's, 432 pages, $25.95.

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how the Party moved to control the Hollywood unions, through classic Stalinist tactics. The editors explain in their introduction that their volume gives "the deserved opportunity, after five decades, to rebuke the 'friendly testimony' of the left-wing turncoats and anti-Communist zealots who identified them to HUAC. Their group testimony provides a vital counterpoint to those lies and assertions."

They do not seem to realize, however, to what extent those they interview provide examples that prove precisely the opposite. The editors write that the Party in Hollywood numbered "at its peak only several hundred official members," and they go on to attribute its success among the film elite to its "umbrella program" that, according to them, had "widespread appeal." They somehow fail to acknowledge the point made by one of the people who conducted interviews for the volume, historian Larry Ceplair. With Steven Englund, Ceplair wrote the definitive study of the blacklist era, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*. Virtually all the Hollywood Communists, they noted, "defended the Stalinist regime, accepted the Comintern's policies and about-faces, and criticized enemies and allies alike with infuriating self-righteousness, superiority, and selective memory which eventually alienated all but the staunchest fellow travelers."

Ceplair and Englund give many examples of just how the tenuous alliance the Reds tried to forge with honest liberals came apart. In the early Thirties, the CP had formed a broad anti-fascist coalition, which shared the support of liberals such as the actor Melvyn Douglas. It broke apart the moment the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed in 1939; when the Reds insisted that their erstwhile liberal allies support American neutrality. That was too much for Douglas. When he introduced a resolution at their Popular Front organization denouncing both "Nazi aggression" and "Soviet perfidy," the Party allowed their organization to collapse rather than have it turn against Stalin. Douglas, of course, was roundly condemned as a fascist. The liberal community had glimpsed the real face of Stalinism.

The editors of *Tender Comrades*, it seems, are still oblivious. Their book is full of wonderful gems that reveal the phoniness and pretentiousness of so many of their subjects. One finds Allen Boretz condemning the Social Democrats "as soft on capitalism and hard on Socialism," yet boasting nevertheless that he was accepted because he had a front table at Chasen's and the Brown Derby. He also still defends the Nazi-Soviet Pact, although he notes he was "very sad" about the Moscow Purge trials. And the writer John Bright notes with pride his condemnation of Earl Browder, the former Communist Party head, for being "a reformist liberal who talked in Marxist phraseology."

Looking back, the writer Paul Jarrico notes his preposterous belief that there was no contradiction between "the interests of the Soviet Union and the interests of the United States." Calling that view an illusion, he admits that "it made me a fool." There are also candid revelations about Party tactics in the union. Abe Polonsky tells of how while working for the CIO, he offered jobs in return for votes in order to defeat the right-wing faction, and how CP leaders deluded themselves into thinking they had won because the rank and file agreed with their policies.

Maurice Rapf explains how his memoir can't be published because it tells "exactly how the party operated in Hollywood, which people don't like to hear." Rapf gives some of the story in his interview. When the Screen Writers Guild was recognized by the industry after its National Labor Relations Board victory in 1937, Rapf was made secretary of the Guild, although he was a relatively new, young, and inexperienced writer. Why? Rapf states frankly: "The Party could control an election, you know. Otherwise, people like me and Harold Buchman and even Ring [Lardner, Jr.] would not have been elected . . . we didn't deserve to be on the board." In that capacity, Rapf was

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put in charge of negotiating with producers for a contract, with all of his producer father's friends. "The Party," he says, "was using me as a front." And, later, the Party sent him into the Democratic Party, where he notes that he got elected to the County Committee.

There are other themes that emerge from the various interviews. Scores of the blacklisted maintain that their films were superb examples of art, whereas those who became friendly witnesses produced only puerile mass entertainment films of little substance. The reverse, of course, is nearer the mark. Alvah Bessie, upon leaving *The New Masses* and the New York Communist writers for Hollywood, wrote the fans of his theater column "if you see any exceptionally bad moving pictures in the future, it will be reasonably certain that I've had a hand in them." In his forthcoming new history of the Left in California, *From West to East: California and the Making of the American Mind* (The Free Press, 1998), Stephen Schwartz writes that "this self-revelation was also extremely prescient, for the very great bulk of the war films produced by Bessie and his Communist colleagues were truly wretched." Schwartz notes in particular the work of Lester Cole, one of the most prominent Hollywood Reds. Cole's film *Blood on the Sun* (1945), Schwartz tells us, was "one of the most racist and dishonest motion pictures ever made in the United States," filled with what he calls "every known cliché of American anti-Japanese prejudice." As one might expect, there is no discussion of this film anywhere in the McGilligan and Buhle book.

The Communists, then, were persistently dishonest, and hardly the heroes portrayed today in films such as *The Front*, *The House on Carroll Street*, *Fellow Traveler*, and especially Irwin Winkler's 1991 film, *Guilty by Suspicion*. When the HUAC hearings first took place, the liberal community in Hollywood rushed to the Ten's defense. But the Ten's insistence upon hiding their true political beliefs and affiliations, their belligerence before HUAC, and their spurious claim that their main goal was simply to defend the right of any American to his private political views isolated them from their allies, who chafed at the propaganda claim that they were fighting an America on the verge of going Fascist.

After the indictment of the Ten, the Reds invoked the Fifth Amendment. Instead of proudly admitting their Communist views and affiliations—and facing the consequences of doing so—they denied they were Communists and argued they were being persecuted because of their fight for peace and democracy. They avoided going to jail, but their mendacity was so obvious that they wound up suffering an even more serious political penalty.

Thus the Ten denied their own beliefs, lest their enemies be proven correct. When they were called Communists, they countered with the charge of redbaiting—the ultimate sin. The great irony, of course, is that, while they were vociferously denouncing the Hollywood blacklist, they were busy putting their own blacklist into action, working hard to isolate those within their own ranks who showed any signs of ideological wavering. In fact, what one had in Hollywood was a concerted attempt to prevent the airing of any negative views about the Communists or Communism. For an intellectual, it was more dangerous to speak up against Stalinists than to keep silent before HUAC: the latter might lead to a temporary loss of income; the former would once and forever lead to the loss of longtime friends and one's entire affinity group. "Unfriendly witnesses," Schwartz notes, "were hailed as heroes of unfettered thought, while those whose testimony reflected a real attempt to understand Communism were defamed as liars." A snitch meant something to the average American; a Stalinist meant little outside the ranks of the beleaguered group of anti-Stalinists. In her mendacious memoir, Lillian Hellman referred to the 1950s as a "scoundrel time." Is it not time to look back and gain some judgment about who the real scoundrels were, and to hold them accountable?

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Nabokov in America

by Donald Lyons

The Library of America's recent publication of the American writings of Vladimir Nabokov in three volumes gives occasion for some thoughts about the nature of the writer's achievement. The first volume, called *Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951*, contains *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Bend Sinister* (1947), and *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1951, revised 1966). The second, called *Novels 1955–1962*, contains *Lolita* (1955), *Pnin* (1957), *Pale Fire* (1962), and, as an appendix, *Lolita: A Screenplay* (written in 1960, published in 1974). In the third volume, called *Novels 1969–1974*, are *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), *Transparent Things* (1972), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974).[1] The textual advisor and annotator throughout is Brian Boyd, the author of an impressively learned, if sometimes oppressively hagiographical, two-volume critical biography of Nabokov.

Nabokov is often thought of as a writer of exile, prey to the twin passions of émigrés, nostalgia and resentment. But he remembered coolly; it was his father—and his own nascent senses and sensibilities—that he recalled warmly. Indeed, he applied the word "exile" to but a part of his post-Russian life. In *Speak, Memory*, he writes: "A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life. The twenty years I spent in my native Russia (1899–1919) take care of the thetic arc. Twenty-one years of voluntary exile in England, Germany and France (1919–1940) supply the obvious antithesis. The period spent in my adopted country (1940–1960) forms a synthesis—and a new thesis." After the new thesis came a new antithesis: a hotel in Montreux, Switzerland, where the writer and his wife, Véra, lived until his death in 1977. His second synthesis (is it strange for Nabokov to be using this Hegelian recipe?) was not of this world. His period of exile, then, was his time in Europe *entre deux guerres*. America was his second *patria*; he was not in exile here; he was at home, and he did his best work here in her tongue.

Thus Nabokov was not a Russian Thucydides or Dante—that is, a banished combatant using a very powerful mind to replay and analyze what went wrong. For one thing, he was too young. Soviet Russia would in time produce its epic elegists, but they were to emerge from the fires of the regime. They would come later: Solzhenitsyn, Akhmatova, others. To assess Nabokov's early years and his comprehension of them—indeed, to begin reading Nabokov—there is no better guide than *Speak, Memory*. The dominant figure of his youth was his father, Vladimir Dmitrievich, a rich reforming noble who lectured in criminal law at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence and edited the liberal law journal *Pravo*. We

1 *Vladimir Nabokov*, edited by Brian Boyd; Library of America; *Volume I: Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951* (710 pages, $35), *Volume II: Novels 1955–1962* (904 pages, $35), *Volume III: Novels 1969–1974* (824 pages, $35).

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take away from *Speak, Memory* two extraordinary snapshots—or rather moving pictures—of the elder Nabokov in "that strange first decade of our century" when "the old and the new, the liberal touch and the patriarchal one, fatal poverty and fatalistic wealth got fantastically interwoven." The writer remembers himself, a little boy sitting at the dining room table, on regular occasions seeing (Nabokov uses a frequentative form) through a window his father being tossed in the air by the peasants of the village:

> There, for an instant, the figure of my father in his wind-rippled white summer suit would be displayed, gloriously sprawling in midair, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome, imperturbable features turned to the sky. Thrice, to the mighty heave-ho of his invisible tossers, he would fly up in this fashion, and the second time he would go higher than the first and then there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin.

Inside this simile, the camera pans down, as it were, from the angels to the corpse in the church below. By a sleight of mind, we are led from the father in triumph to the father in death (for it is somehow his corpse).

At another memorable moment in the memoir, Nabokov glances at his father's death, more openly but still not without elaborate indirection and subterfuge. When the writer was twelve, he learned from schoolfellows that his father had challenged a scurrilous anti-Semitic journalist to a duel. As he is driven home through the snow-muffled streets in an agonizingly slow sleigh, the boy imagines the worst. But at home he finds smiling faces (the cad had apologized):

> I saw my mother's serene everyday face, but I could not look at my father. And then it happened: my heart welled in me . . . and I had no handkerchief, and ten years were to pass before a certain night in 1922, at a public lecture in Berlin, when my father shielded the lecturer (his old friend Milyukov) from the bullets of two Russian Fascists and, while vigorously knocking down one of the assassins, was fatally shot by the other. But no shadow was cast by that future event upon the bright stairs of our St. Petersburg house; the large, cool hand resting on my head did not quaver, and several lines of play in a difficult chess composition were not blended yet on the board.

This is the deepest note in Nabokov: an emotional *pudeur*, an overmastering shyness in the presence of love that deploys in dazzling permutation the pawns of irony and the rooks of sadness.

Nabokov has been compared to Conrad, another Slav who became a great English writer. But Conrad's idiosyncratic and inspissated style is an elephant in the zoo of language—slow, wise, cynical; Nabokov is a panther, a quicksilver study in words. English was in a way his first language:

> I learned to read English before I could read Russian. My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar—Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts—"Who is Ben?" "He is Dan," "Sam is in bed," and so on. Although it all remained rather stiff and patchy (the compiler was handicapped by having to employ—for the initial lessons, at least—words of not more than three letters), my imagination somehow managed to obtain the necessary data. Wan-faced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud in the possession of certain tools ("Ben has an axe"), they now drift with a slow-motioned slouch across the remotest backdrop of memory. . . .

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Nabokov became a novelist in Russian in the "years of exile" where he led "an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly important strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, émigrés, happened to dwell." His Russian work—novels like *Mary*; *King, Queen, Knave*; *The Defense*; *Glory*; *Laughter in the Dark*; and *The Gift*—is much more infused with immediate sensations of the arbitrary cruelties of the century's political systems than his English work. Virtually all of the Russian fiction has been translated, often by Nabokov's son, Dmitri, in collaboration with, or under the eye of, his father; it deserves reading, especially *The Defense* and *The Gift*. So in a sense joining Nabokov at *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is like paddling into the Hudson at Poughkeepsie.

But, whether in Europe or in America, Nabokov always exercised a sure and profound judgment about our century's political monstrosities. About Russia, he wrote:

> Under the Tsars . . . despite the fundamentally inept and ferocious character of their rule, a freedom-loving Russian had had incomparably more means of expressing himself, and used to run incomparably less risk in doing so, than under Lenin. Since the reforms of the eighteen-sixties, the country had possessed (though not always adhered to) a legislation of which any Western democracy might have been proud, a vigorous public opinion that held despots at bay, widely read periodicals of all shades of liberal political thought, and what was especially striking, fearless and independent judges. . . . When revolutionaries did get caught, banishment to Tomsk or Omsk (now Bombsk) was a restful vacation in comparison to the concentration camps that Lenin introduced. Political exiles escaped from Siberia with farcical ease, witness the famous flight of Trotsky—Santa Leo, Santa Claws, Trotsky—merrily riding back in a Yuletide sleigh drawn by reindeer: On, Rocket, on, Stupid, on, Butcher and Blitzen!

From his days as a student in Cambridge in 1920 until the end of his life, he fought, with the contempt of knowledge for ignorance, Western apologists for and prettifiers of Bolshevism. His unsleeping eye for—his tactless voice against—all varieties of such wicked nonsense cost Nabokov, it is very likely, the Nobel Prize. (Losing it, of course, excluded him from Pearl Buck's table and banished him to the kitchen with Tolstoy, Chekhov, James, Conrad, Proust, and Joyce.)

In 1923, in Berlin, Nabokov met and courted Véra Slonim, the great and long and happy love of his life. They wed in 1925. Dmitri, their only child, was born in 1934. If the Nabokov union was as steady as that of James Joyce and Nora Barnacle, Véra was no Nora. She was Vladimir's first and ideal reader, and his inseparable companion (even, famously, in his Cornell classrooms). To her he dedicated all his English writings; some of them are directly addressed to her. In 1940, Nabokov and his Jewish wife took their six-year-old son to St. Nazaire on the coast of Brittany to board the last ship out of France (it was a close call, for the rapid German advance of the preceding weeks had made it impossible for the ship to sail, as intended, from Le Havre or even Cherbourg). Here is the memoir's final sentence:

> There, in front of us, where a broken row of houses stood between us and the harbor, and where the eye encountered all sorts of stratagems, such as pale-blue and pink underwear cakewalking on a clothesline, or a lady's bicycle and a striped cat oddly sharing a rudimentary balcony of cast iron, it was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—Find What the Sailor Has Hidden—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen.

This delightful visual puzzle offers insight into the Nabokovian enigma: against a remote context of circumambient malignity (the Nazi invasion of France) there are

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freshly observed banal particulars (the underwear cakewalking); behind them is a luminous particular that, properly comprehended, is both sign and salvation (the ship); farther back still is the solicitous and tremulous love of parent for child. The prose keeps switching focus between a synesthetic tenderness (life as it should be) and a fastidious cruelty (life as it often is).

Once and for all be it said that Nabokov's amazingly delicate and arrogantly omnivorous perceptiveness operates finally in the interest of the good. Of course, the shy, sly master might object to such a formulation. "Nabokov is a prism. His, or its, sole object is to refract and by refracting, to recreate a world in retrospect. The world itself, the inhabitants of that world, are of no social or historical importance whatever." So might he, in his monumental disdain for the Social Usefulness of Art, mount what looks like the rhetorical throne of *l'art pour l'art*, of a programmatic aestheticism. In fact, Nabokov wrote these words (all save the first) in explication not of himself but of his great model, Proust. It seems to have gone virtually unnoticed that Nabokov is, as artist, the child of Proust. He said, "A garden in a concert hall and a picture gallery in the garden—this is one of my definitions of Proust's art." What could, in its toying with art, artifice, and nature, be more Nabokovian? Proust's immense labor was, declaredly, a search for a technique that might, by linking percepts, annihilate time. As a philosophy, Proust's conceptual scheme may be threadbare; as an ascesis in seeing and feeling, as a discipline in metaphor, in Aristotle's "finding of likenesses," his scheme is artistic gold. And, significantly, Proust's art is ultimately not a hothouse flower but sides with humanity (think of the Dreyfus theme). Poor Proust condemned himself to an endless, solipsistic, tail-chewing analysis of the impossibility of love and the power of jealousy. The hale Russian spared himself such onanistic miseries; he wrote a score of books in many voices instead of one long book in one voice; he preferred deviously intricate narrative puzzles to intricately deviant *analyse des sentiments*. Humbert Humbert thinks of calling the last part of his story "Dolorès Disparue" in homage to the Albertine Disparue of "another internal combustion martyr." Nakokov was certainly the superior ventriloquist. But all reservations made and differences granted, Nabokov is unimaginable without Proust (that angel simile, for instance).

Nabokov's first two English-language novels are glum displays of paranoid psychology and paranoid politics. He wrote *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in Paris in December of 1938 and January of 1939. *Bend Sinister*, he tells us, "was the first novel I wrote in America, and that was a half a dozen years after she and I had adopted each other. The greater part of the book was composed in the middle 'Forties, at a particularly cloudless and vigorous period of life." The book, however, is a cloudy and Kafkaesque parable of tyranny, interesting only in that the Hitlerite-Stalinoid tyrant's archetypal deed consists of causing the death of the philosopher-hero's child. The innocence of childhood is sacred ground.

If coming to America was the defining movement of Nabokov's life, writing *Lolita* was its defining artistic act. He had written a prototype of the story (pervert, nymphet, death) in Paris in Russian in 1939, which was posthumously translated and published as *The Enchanter*. It took a good decade for *Lolita* to ripen into an American book. Nabokov began writing it in 1950 and finished in December 1953. "I was faced," he explains in the afterword, "by the task of inventing America." He had to learn to see and fix America ("Every summer my wife and I go butterfly hunting") and to hear America ("*Lolita* was the record of my love affair with the . . . 'English language'"—he ought to have said "American language"). Not the least of the enchantments of the book, now forty-five years old, is its merciless capture of the idioms and customs of prosperous postwar America: it was composed in the high noon of middle-class optimism about cultured refinement and progressive educa-

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tion, a time that, in comparison to the reigning preoccupations of today, makes Charlotte Haze look Periclean; it caught youth culture in its pre-rock infancy (Lolita drools over heartthrob crooners like Frank Sinatra and Eddie Fisher). Supposedly set in 1947 and 1948, *Lolita* feels more like the restless early 1950s, years when pampered youth was just feeling its oats and reveling in jukeboxes, movie magazines, drive-ins, chewing gum—and brewing the tornado to come. *Lolita* hears it all with near-perfect pitch (near-perfect, since the writer does at one point confuse "candy bar" with "drug store": "She might visit a candy bar with her girl friends . . .").

America is registered throughout with European wit (though not, as Nabokov himself was quick to insist, with Flaubertian contempt). Here is a glimpse of a drive-in:

> There was still that stream of pale moths siphoned out of the night by my headlights. People were still going to the movies. While searching for night lodgings, I passed a drive-in. In a selenian glow, truly mystical in its contrast with the moonless and massive night, on a gigantic screen slanting away among dark drowsy fields, a thin phantom raised a gun, both he and his arm reduced to tremulous dishwater by the oblique angle of that receding world,—and the next moment a row of trees shout off the gesticulation.

Eyes this urgently metaphoric, metonymic, metamorphic—note "siphoned" and "dishwater"—take a fine Proustian pleasure in things.

Of course, these are the eyes at once of Nabokov and of his puppet Humbert Humbert, that "baboon of genius but a baboon" in his manipulator's words. Nabokov might have been thinking of Humbert's hirsute and saturnine appearance; what people look like is often what they are in Nabokov. What Humbert is, though, is glaringly clear: he is a madman, a maniac. To use a mad narrator, to have a clever, erudite, sophisticated, pathetic, funny figure attempting to inveigle us into complicity with his designs against the world, to keep the balls of fascination and of revulsion aloft in the bright air: this was the technical task the writer set himself. How amused Nabokov would be by academic preening about "unreliable narrators." Flaunting his unreliability, Humbert dares us to catch him up, to see around him. Nabokov is indeed not the first writer to interpose a madman between reader and truth; think of Swift's *Modest Proposal*. There are also the figures of Kafka and of Gogol, the quirky Ukrainian about whom Nabokov wrote a quirky little book in 1942.

Is "mad" or "bad" the better word for Humbert? Humbert, a pedophile in search of the archetypal girl loved and lost in his boyhood, finds his lost love in Dolores Haze, the twelve-year-old daughter of his landlady. He lusts for Lolita, eventually beds her, claims to love her, drives her by his faux-paternal-but-in-fact-Proustianly-sexual possessiveness into the clutches of a sadistic pornographer. By the end, the young woman has slid contentedly from the bourgeois comforts of her youth to working-class near-squalor. She is polite and serene when Humbert visits after an intermission of three years:

> Couple of inches taller. Pink-rimmed glasses. New, heaped-up hairdo, new ears. . . . She was frankly and hugely pregnant. Her head looked smaller (only two seconds had passed really, but let me give them as much wooden duration as life can stand), and her pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed. She wore a brown, sleeveless cotton dress and sloppy felt slippers.

The rape of Lolita—of her youth if not her technical innocence—by the selfishness and wickedness of Humbert and his more evil twin, Quilty, is unequivocally presented as a tragedy, as a sin, as an irreparable loss. If Humbert comes close to redemption, it is in this scene when he feels love for the no-longer-child Lolita. Perverts don't tolerate change and age; Humbert has grown up,

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although too late. *Lolita* is the saddest, as well as the funniest, of books.

Lolita gave—and, unlike *Ulysses*, continues to give—scandal. At first, it was deemed unpublishable by respectable houses such as Viking; New Directions; Farrar, Straus; and Doubleday and had to be brought out by Maurice Girodias's Olympia Press, a Paris outfit that specialized in tony pornography by the likes of Henry Miller and William Burroughs, as well as not-so-tony stuff like *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* and *Les Amours de Milord Grosvit* (titles cited by Nabokov in his afterword). Only in 1958—with *Pnin* already published and his Herculean labors on an edition of *Eugene Onegin* behind him—was the infamous book published in America, by Putnam. By then it had been lauded and laundered by cultural mandarins such as Lionel Trilling, Graham Greene, Harry Levin, and Dorothy Parker. There was a furious denunciation in the daily *New York Times* by arch-middlebrow Orville Prescott ("dull, dull, dull . . . fatuous . . . highbrow pornography") that served the book well. Things settled down for thirty years or so, during which *Lolita* gained general acceptance as a masterwork, universally adored and even read.

Then came feminism. One began to hear, "I have problems with *Lolita*." A chill surrounded the book in academic circles, like frost on a margarita glass. To teach it was to invite censure; the two books I got into trouble for teaching were *Lolita* and Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*. Some feminists banned, others revised: Paula Vogel wrote a play—actually, a good play—called *How I Learned to Drive* that billed itself as in investigation of the Lolita problem from the perspective of a Lolita. A new film version is having trouble finding a U.S. distributor (the Stanley Kubrick movie, made in an ugly England, was, except for James Mason's performance as Humbert, and Shelley Winters's stint as Charlotte Haze, a joyless travesty). More recently, conservative voices, alarmed about child abuse, have joined the clamor against the book. A more serious and responsible conservative critic, Norman Podhoretz, has written that "in aestheticizing the hideous, Nabokov—as I can now clearly see—comes close to prettifying it." He calls *Lolita* "a dangerous book paradoxically made all the more dangerous by its dazzling virtues as a work of art" and says, albeit with seeming reluctance, that "we might have been better off if even a masterpiece like *Lolita* had never been published." This might better be directed at Humbert than at his creator. A heavy-handed attempt to respond to Mr. Podhoretz's concerns was made in the *TLS* by Colin McGinn. Mr. McGinn reminds us that in this fiction the wicked end badly: far from being "a happy and contented paedophile," Humbert "ends his days in prison, soon to die of coronary thrombosis, alone, defeated, and broken." But penitent and wretched codas fool no one if the preceding tale has been lubricious or cruel. But *Lolita* is not even so lewd as daytime TV, and Nabokov is not de Sade (the subject of so many academic courses admiring of his "transgressiveness" and the object of Roger Shattuck's legitimate horror in his recent study *Forbidden Knowledge*). No celebrant of cruelty, Nabokov is the antithesis of de Sade.

Nabokov did take a risk in *Lolita*: he endowed a pervert with some of his own arrogance, his own wit, his own eye, his own ear—but not his own heart. And in so doing he was adequately prophylactic against real moral danger. Humbert is from the get-go a guilty creature wretchedly destructive in all his inept obsessions. And Lolita, the object of Humbert's last lust, is (are you listening, feminists?) an unforgettably alive, bratty, funny, trapped, sad young woman—victim and more than victim. "Behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rages and miserable convolutions," as Humbert realizes. Who, having read *Lolita*, is tempted to imitate Humbert? Who does not weep for the destruction of Dolores?

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By September 1955, *Lolita* was topping the bestseller lists. By the end of October, it was displaced by Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak won, and was forced to refuse, the Nobel Prize. Nabokov was not amused. He saw, correctly, that *Zhivago*, while anti-Stalinist, was "also fundamentally antiliberal in glorifying Lenin's overthrow of Russian democracy," in Brian Boyd's words. Moreover, he considered, perhaps improbably, that the whole saga of Pasternak's and the book's domestic persecution was a Soviet plot, a huge piece of disinformation. His on-again-off-again friend and early sponsor, Edmund Wilson, who had never so much as reviewed a Nabokov novel, waxed dithyrambic about *Zhivago*. Nabokov's wry reaction: "Delenda est *Zhivago*!"

Pnin is the satyr play at the Nabokovian drama festival, the palate-cleanser at the banquet. Everyone likes this picaresque account of the hapless and maladroit exiled Russian professor at "Waindell College, a somewhat provincial institution characterized by an artificial lake in the middle of a landscaped campus, by ivied galleries connecting the various halls, by murals displaying recognizable members of the faculty in the act of passing on the torch of knowledge from Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Pasteur to a lot of monstrously built farm boys and farm girls. . . ." Waindell has resemblances, of course, to Cornell, where Nabokov taught European fiction and Russian literature—and not, as a recent writer had it, creative writing—from 1947 until his resignation, made possible by *Lolita* royalties, in 1959.[2] (Thomas Pynchon was in one of his classes, but Nabokov claimed not to remember him.) Timofey Pnin is not, his creator insists, an absent-minded professor:

> On the contrary, he was perhaps too wary, too persistently on the lookout for diabolical pitfalls, too painfully on the alert lest his erratic surroundings (unpredictable America) inveigle him into some bit of preposterous oversight. It was the world that was absent-minded and it was Pnin whose business it was to set it straight. His life was a constant war with insensate objects that fell apart, or attacked him, or refused to function, or viciously got themselves lost as soon as they entered the sphere of his existence.

Apart from the endlessly funny portraits of the worthy Pnin (who, incidentally, has a benign rapport with a gifted adolescent) and of a contentious émigré society, *Pnin* ranks with, if below, Randall Jarrell's wonderful *Pictures from an Institution* (1954) as a satire of academic life in its decade. Harvard had refused to hire Nabokov as professor of Russian when linguist Roman Jakobson opposed the appointment, saying, "Even if one allows that he is an important writer, are we next to invite an elephant to be professor of zoology?" Here is a bit of Nabokov's revenge:

> Nor did Pnin, as a teacher, ever presume to approach the lofty halls of modern scientific linguistics, that ascetic fraternity of phonemes, that temple wherein earnest young people are taught not the language itself, but the method of teaching others to teach that method; which method, like a waterfall splashing from rock to rock, ceases to be a medium of rational navigation but perhaps in some fabulous future may become instrumental in evolving esoteric dialects—Basic Basque and so forth—spoken only by certain esoteric machines.

Pale Fire, which was written in Ithaca in 1960 and 1961, is the by-product of, the funhouse-mirror version of, Nabokov's gigantic *Eugene Onegin* translation-cum-commentary. It consists of poem, itself called *Pale Fire*, and commentary. The poem, 999 lines in run-on rhyming couplets (not heroic couplets, *pace* Boyd) by the revered and scholarly poet John Shade, is full of wry, awkward, sentimentalized grief at the death by drowning—probably suicide—of the poet's ugly-duckling daughter. The

2 Nabokov did, at Stanford in the summer of 1941, teach a course called "The Art of Writing," in which he orated and read no student writing.

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verses have some elegiac plangency (most sweetly, perhaps when the poet addresses his wife of forty years, as in: "I love you when you call me to admire/ A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire") and some satiric *trouvailles*, but they strike me as on the whole a labored stunt. Brian Boyd is seldom so extravagant as when he claims that "English poetry has few things better to offer than 'Pale Fire.'" He implies that it puts in the shade poems like Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Pound's *Cantos*, works it in no way resembles, although Nabokov did put a parody of Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* into the mouth of Clare Quilty in *Lolita*. Rather, the poem *Pale Fire* reads like a cunning simulacrum of late-eighteenth-century meditative verse by, say, Cowper or Wordsworth. But it's fake antique. One can't be Robert Frost by taking thought.

The commentary turns out to be no commentary, but a disjointed, deranged self-portrait of and by the commentator. He is Shade's neighbor, Charles Kinbote. Kinbote gives us to understand that he is in fact Charles Xavier the Beloved, the exiled, hunted, and winkingly, nudgingly homosexual king of Ruritanian Zembla. According to Kinbote, an assassin sent by the revolutionary regime to kill Charles has by mistake killed Shade, who has left his poem to be explicated, with ludicrous ineptitude and perversely irrelevant intrusiveness, by the mad Kinbote. If *Lolita* was an epistemological tease (no, Humbert is not Nabokov), *Pale Fire* offers a kaleidoscope of epistemological possibilities. Is Kinbote really Charles? If so, is he mad? if not, is he mad? Did Shade exist or is the whole text we possess—poem and commentary—a confection of Kinbote's? Or are both poem and commentary the work of Shade, still very much alive? (Boyd plumps, unpersuasively, for the last solution.) Best perhaps to leave something of the onion to be eaten and to take it for what it seems: Shade's poem plus Kinbote-Charles's commentary.

Pale Fire has its pleasures: the formal brio that shuttles us back and forth from poem to mad commentator; the parody of scholarly omniscience; the rare moments of beauty and feeling. Behind the thing can be glimpsed Nabokov's resentment—or at least fatigue—after a long servitude to Pushkin: Pale Fire, or the Annotator's Revenge. The book has received high praise, notably from Mary McCarthy, who called it "one of the great works of art of this century." On the contrary, it epitomizes Nabokov's capacity for Alexandrian preciosity, which here is fatally uninformed, unanchored by any substantial moral weight.

If *Pale Fire* is overestimated, *Ada* is today rather undervalued. It marked a curious turn in Nabokov's public fortunes. He and the book made the cover of *Time*—then a big deal—and got some rapt reviews, from Alfred Kazin, for instance. But it repelled some reviewers, among them Philip Toynbee, Morris Dickstein, and the egregious Mary McCarthy. Since then, the book has come to be seen as Nabokov's *Finnegans Wake*: an impenetrable late work written in a forbiddingly macaronic idiolect. It's actually more like Nabokov's *Golden Bowl*: a baroque effusion, mandarin in style but suffused with carnality and love. The plot, the whole premise of the book, sounds absurd when summarized: at the start, it is 1884, and we are at the rural manor (*dacha*, really) of Ardis as two youths—Van Veen, fourteen, and Ada, twelve—discover and consummate their love. Supposedly cousins, they are in fact full brother and sister. They next meet at Ardis in 1888 and, after spasms of jealousy, come together again. Circumstances—Ada's marriage to another, Van's compulsive satyriasis, her career as a movie star, his career as a sort of psychological philosopher, incest taboos—keep our pair apart, except for a few adulterous trysts in 1900, until 1922. He is then fifty-two; she, fifty. They then live happily and faithfully together (for Van, "the ordeal was morally rewarding, physically preposterous") for forty-five years. They collaborate in the writing of books, including the one we're reading, the record of their love. At the time of writing, Van is ninety-seven and Ada,

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ninety-five. The book concludes in a mock-blurb for itself:

> *Ada*, an ample and delightful chronicle, whose principal part is staged in a dream-bright America. . . . On the fabulous country estate of his art-collecting uncle, Daniel Veen, an ardent childhood romance develops in a series of fascinating scenes between Van and pretty Ada, a truly unusual *gamine*. . . . That the relationship is not simply dangerous *cousinage*, but possesses an aspect prohibited by law, is hinted in the very first pages.
>
> In spite of many intricacies of plot and psychology, the story proceeds at a spanking pace.

There is, as well, a science-fiction side to the story: in consequence of some cosmic malfunction known as "the L disaster" (supposedly electricity, but perhaps really *Lolita*), a world called Antiterra has split off from the earth. We are in Antiterra, where time and history are disorientingly different. On Antiterra, "Russia" is a quaint synonym for "Estoty," the American province of the USA, which covers the entire Western hemisphere. "Tartary" is the word used to refer to a grim tyranny extending "from Kurland to the Kuriles." The rest of the civilized world is managed by "the British commonwealth." In practice, all this elaborate backstory means not too much: the characters interlard their speech with Russian phrases, and amusing paradoxes crop up. It scatters a light dusting of the fantastic upon an already outrageous story. Nabokov liked H. G. Wells. All the play with space and time does, however, figure Nabokov's longing to combine, incestuously to wed, his two homelands into one. History has denied me Russia? Very well, I will make a Russia out of where I am.

But fundamentally *Ada* is a love story, and a love story very much in the wake of *Lolita*. It recounts, early on, the deflowering of a twelve-year-old girl, for one thing. Of course, *this* girl is rapturously involved with her blood brother of fourteen, her intellectual and spiritual twin. It's not so much incest as self-love. They love each other for eighty-three years and live together for forty-five. This is an anti-*Lolita*, a sunshine romance. *Lolita* was naturally on his mind: his later life and work were to be as inexorably changed and colored by that book as Philip Roth's were to be by *Portnoy's Complaint* (another great postwar American novel). The girl's very name pops up everywhere in his later writings: in *Pale Fire*'s poem, we hear that ". . . Hurricane/ Lolita swept from Florida to Maine"; in *Ada*, Van's aunt has a ranch "near Lolita, Texas" and, in one of her movies, *Don Juan's Last Fling*, Ada plays "Dolores, a dancing girl." Without *Lolita*, Ada would never have been in movies. Nabokov, who wrote a screenplay (unused) for Kubrick and who enjoyed the movie's success, had fallen for film.

The Van-Ada relationship is, up to a point, the antithesis of that of Humbert and Dolores. There is, this time, a hot-blooded and open-eyed mutuality. Theirs is a claustrophobically intense, exclusive union of two precociously brilliant exquisites that lasts from childhood to extreme age. Those who love Van and Ada love precisely their mix of erudition and erotic bliss; they revel in Ada's anatomies of bliss. But this hermetic smugness has put off some readers. Van and Ada resemble in their perfectly attuned and capacious sensibilities—although not in their sexual voracity—the Glass family of J. D. Salinger, a writer whom Nabokov liked. There is in Salinger, too (and perhaps in Henry James) a yearning for transcendence that expresses itself in the conversation of finely vibrating persons. Salinger's mystics famously agonize over their gifts; they worry about that "fat lady" and about Jesus. Nabokov never strikes this note; his exceptional beings uncomplicatedly rejoice in their exceptionalness. Or so it seems. But a case can be made for the writer's having "placed" Van and Ada. Boyd, quoting Nabokov as saying, "I loathe Van Veen," makes the case, if a bit too earnestly; Boyd is forever fighting against the notion of Nabokov as a sneering and snobbish aesthete (admittedly, it's a necessary fight).

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There is another gambit in recent Nabokov criticism worth countering: deconstructionist cant that sees Nabokov the aesthete being subverted by Nabokov the humanist. Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts* (1994) spends much time wrestling with this (illusory) dichotomy. Richard Rorty, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), claims that "Nabokov's best novels are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas." According to Rorty, Nabokov's project is to "combine altruism and joy," to concoct a "synthesis of ecstasy and kindness." But Nabokov, lacking "social hope," gave up on "the modern liberal idea of working for a future in which cruelty will no longer be institutionalized." That is, Nabokov scorned utopian projects and considered literature promoting them "topical trash." Instead of the "social hope" that the professedly anti-metaphysical Rorty exacts, Nabokov is accused of believing in immorality and art, "an inconsistent mixture of Platonic atemporalism and anti-Platonic sensualism." These ideas, or any others—"such pallid ghosts as 'human life,' 'art' and 'morality,'" as Rorty calls them—are anathema to the new materialism. And Rorty tries to explain Nabokov's ideas as attempts to escape from his father's shadow etc.

Such bumbling reductivism only reminds us that Nabokov must not be confused with his characters, be they cruel or kind. In his art, Nabokov exorcises cruelty. In *Ada*, there is a sweet, tender character whose goodness shames and stains the happy pair: Lucette, the younger half-sister of Ada. She nurses a desolating crush on Van from childhood. When she's twenty-five—four days before an ocean voyage that will prove fatal to her—Van kisses her:

> She tasted exactly as Ada at Ardis, in the early afternoon, sweet saliva, salty epithelium, cherries, coffee. He pushes her away. "Why, Van? Why, why, why?" "You know perfectly well why. I love her, not you, and I simply refuse to complicate matters by entering into yet another relationship." "That's rich," said Lucette, "you've gone far enough with me on several occasions, even when I was a kid; your refusing to go further is a mere quibble on your part; and besides, besides you've been unfaithful to her with a thousand girls, you dirty cheat!"

These tones of voice—as if Humbert and Lolita were to be transported into a Marivaux comedy—establish an unmistakable distance between writer and characters. Lucette is a smart cookie and, with Ada absent, things go swimmingly for her and Van on that liner ("I'm a brand-new girl now. . . . A happy new girl. Alone with you on an abandoned ship. . . .") until they go to a movie. It is *Don Juan's Last Fling*, and the sight of Ada sends Van off into a Lucette-less erotic reverie. Depressed, Lucette jumps overboard:

> Although Lucette had never died before—no, *dived* before, Violet—from such a height, in such a disorder of shadows and snaking reflections, she went with hardly a splash through the wave that humped to welcome her. That perfect end was spoiled by her instinctively surfacing in an immediate sweep—instead of surrendering under water to her drugged lassitude as she had planned to do on her last night ashore if it ever did come to this. The silly girl had not rehearsed the technique of suicide as, say, free-fall parachutists do every day in the element of another chapter. Owing to the tumultuous swell and her not being sure which way to peer through the spray and the darkness and her own tentaclinging hair—t,a,c,l—she could make out the lights of the liner, an easily imagined many-eyed bulk mightily receding in heartless triumph. Now I've lost my next note.

The imaginative empathy with which Van, the seemingly cool speaker here, recreates the drowning *is* an exercise in sorrow and remorse. The interruptions ("no, *dived* before, Violet"; "t,a,c,l"; "Now I've lost my next note") reveal that at this point in the novel (and not always before) what we are reading are the memoirs of Van. He is dictating them to Violet Knox, "an enchanting

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English blonde with doll eyes, a velvet carnation, and a tweed-cupped little rump" who has worked for him (chastely) as a typist since 1957. The text itself in its late stages becomes labile, swooning, polyphonic (the influence of Joyce, doubtless). Its penultimate section consists of the preface to Van's successful study, *The Texture of Time*—a very Proustian project—but this discursive study suddenly becomes a narrative account of the odd way time and space have finally united Van and Ada. In the last part, after a rueful tribute to Lucette, Van and Ada "die, as it were, *into* the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of the blurb." The blurb's "poetry" is, as we've seen, mere vulgar hype, but *Ada* survives its own self-mockery. It's an amazing work of joy, of disappointment, of forgiveness, of writing.

After the anemic and negligible *Transparent Things* came Nabokov's final novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* It is an anti-memoir by an anti-Nabokov whose life and works bear a dream-distorted resemblance to those of the real one. The narrator, one Vadim Vadimych N——, is an exiled, much-married, neurotic writer who has published novels in Russian and in English. Among his English titles are *Dr. Olga Repnin*, *A Kingdom by the Sea* (one of *Lolita*'s rejected titles), and *Ardis*. His squalid life has included a tour of American motels—". . . all my motels (*Mes Moteaux*, as Verlaine might have said!), the Lakeviews, the Valley Views, the Mountain Views, the Plumed Serpent Court in New Mexico, the Lolita Lodge in Texas. . ."—and a sexual infatuation with his daughter Bel when she was twelve and thirteen. So as not to act on this itch, Vadim marries a pretentious philistine and by so doing forever alienates his highly literate, indeed blue-stocking, daughter. In the lurid refractions of *Look at the Harlequins!*, Nabokov is making fun of what naïve readers of his books—of *Lolita*, especially—imagined his life was like. It's a coy and defensive conceit that wears out its welcome well before the end.

But the end is remarkable. Vadim has always felt himself prey to "madness . . . lying in wait for me behind this or that alder or boulder since infancy." His madness has taken the form of a spatio-temporal block that renders him unable to envision—and therefore to execute—his return home from the simplest journey outdoors. A bright and loving woman, known only as You (though we learn that she was a classmate of Bel's), cures him of this synesthetic disorder. Vadim seems at last to be metamorphosing into his dream-world twin, Vladimir, just as You seems very close to Véra. (Illogically, *Look at the Harlequins!* is dedicated, by Vadim, to Véra.) Full of the will to master reality and of an equal will to surrender to love, the book makes a somehow fitting, if parasitic, coda to a stupendous career.

Like Balanchine, Nabokov is an endlessly playful formalist whose elegant patterns are really shapes of deep and supple feeling. Without being a heedless sensualist, he brought a delight in the body, in all the senses, to rich expression. He took cruelty and pride for his subjects as James and Proust had done. He is certainly a great novelist and his best work—*Lolita*; *Pnin*; *Ada*; *Speak, Memory*—remains unsurpassed in the last half of this century.

I find very few slips in Boyd's meticulous notes: on I, 700, he identifies what Nabokov calls "Racine's absurd play" as *Athélie* instead of *Athalie*; on III, 822, there are two errors about the movie *Black Widow*. Vadim Vadimych calls it *The Black Widow* and Boyd does not correct him; worse, Boyd tells us that Van Johnson was in it. Neither Van Johnson nor Van Veen was in it; Van Heflin was; it was directed by Nunnally Johnson. (Nabokov would have adored the small confusion; perhaps, from Antiterra, he caused it.) Peccadillos aside, Boyd has edited one of the best texts in the entire Library of America series.

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Egon Schiele at MOMA

by Karen Wilkin

Someone's bound to make a movie about Egon Schiele. I'm surprised that none of the current crop of young actors with surly expressions and aspirations to be taken seriously as artists has staked a claim to the Austrian painter's life, the way Madonna has with Frida Kahlo. Schiele's history has everything—conflict, sex, persecution, social criticism, and even hints of incest. You can imagine the synopsis.

Born in 1890 to a bourgeois family in a provincial Austrian town. Age twelve: in trouble for disrupting his *Gymnasium* classes by drawing. Age fourteen: death of his father from syphilis. Struggle to convince his uncle-guardian to allow him to apply to the Vienna School of Applied Arts, in defiance of his late father's wish that he enroll at the local polytechnical school. Drawings presented to the School of Applied Arts are so impressive that he is advised to set his sights higher and apply to the Academy of Fine Arts. Age sixteen: triumphantly passes Academy entrance exam, earning his guardian's support—for the moment. (The incest angle? Schiele's sister Gerti, four years younger, often posed for him, naked.)

At the Academy: despite his precocious talent, Schiele soon finds himself at loggerheads with a conservative faculty. Before age eighteen: participates in first exhibition. A year later, Gustav Klimt, Schiele's hero, selects four of his works for an important exhibition, resulting in Schiele's acquaintance with the architect Josef Hofmann and affiliation with the Wiener Werkstätte. (Stylish sets here.) Klimt (good role for an older actor) initially has a powerful influence on Schiele's style and remains a life-long friend. (Flash forward: after Klimt dies at the beginning of 1918, Schiele draws his portrait from his corpse in the hospital morgue.) Back at the Academy: Schiele argues violently with his professors and leaves before completing his third year. Joins other radical artists to form "The New Art Group." (More young actors with surly expressions.) Age twenty: Schiele's brand of Expressionist, angst-ridden art has begun to attract distinguished collectors, but at the opening of a large international exhibition, the Emperor Franz Josef singles out a nude by guess who as particularly displeasing. (See the "too many notes, Herr Mozart" scene in *Amadeus*.)

Before age twenty-one: falls out with his guardian over money. (Dramatic confrontation.) Lives with his model, Wally Neuzil. Penniless, they move to Schiele's mother's home town in Bohemia, scandalizing neighbors by their unmarried state and by Schiele's having local young girls pose for him nude—they should only have known about his sister. The couple settle in a small town near Vienna. Schiele's career blossoms. Spring of 1912: accused of seducing a minor and arrested. During the trial, one of Schiele's drawings is burnt publicly. Acquitted of the seduction charge, but convicted of "distributing obscene drawings"

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since minors who posed for him were exposed to studies of nudes on his studio walls; spends more than three weeks in the local jail.

After his public ordeal, Schiele travels a good deal and has exhibitions in Austria, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and France, including a major retrospective at a Munich gallery at the ripe age of twenty-three and another one in Vienna less than two years later. Experiments with new techniques, such as photography and printmaking, and publishes prose poems. (Fast cuts.) Then, a new love interest: Edith Harms, the respectable daughter of a machinist. They marry, four days before Schiele reports for duty in World War I. Potential for a pathetic separation scene, except that he seems to have been regarded highly enough as an artist to serve as a noncombatant, and Edith is able to join him at his postings. First they are at a prisoner of war camp for Russian officers, later at the Imperial War Museum, Vienna. Schiele's war service consists of office work, and doing portraits of prisoners and his superiors. (Opportunity to play down the fact that Austria was on the wrong side of the war.)

The Schiele movie concludes with high drama. Exhibitions in Vienna and abroad are well received both by critics and collectors. Money and prestige accrue. Schiele takes a new studio. A museum show is planned. Edith expects their first child. Enter the dreaded Spanish influenza of 1918. Edith succumbs first—poignant scene of Schiele drawing her on her deathbed—followed three days later by her husband, aged twenty-eight. (See what I mean about his story having *everything*?)

What is remarkable is that even though Schiele's biography, with its clichés about the tortured, misunderstood genius and doomed talent, is tailor-made for the "Van Gogh's ear" approach to art history, Schiele's reputation rests not on the juicy details of his short life, but on the startling works he produced in a career lasting little more than a decade. Perhaps this should be seen simply as testimony to the power of his art, specifically to its blend of simmering eroticism, tense draughtsmanship, and high-strung self-consciousness, a combination that is both unmistakable and impossible to ignore. Schiele's images of women and his portraits, especially his self-portraits, are potent stuff indeed—feverish, testosterone-driven pictures that make you intensely curious about what this obsessive young artist might have achieved had he lived longer. Or do they?

Until the end of 1997, we will be able to ponder that question intelligently, thanks to the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of the collection of Dr. Rudolf Leopold, a large and comprehensive selection that includes some of Schiele's most characteristic works—as well as some of his most obscure—in all media.[1] The collection ranges from "signature" images of unabashed, spread-eagled nudes and bony pubescent girls hoisting their skirts, to little known canvases of checkerboard landscapes and city scenes; it covers the entire span of Schiele's production, from a schoolboy self-portrait, done when the artist was fifteen, to the two lovingly observed drawings of his dying wife. (The postmortem drawing of Klimt with closed, sunken eyes is here, too.) The collection, soon to become part of a new Viennese museum dedicated to Austrian art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has only recently been made available to the public, so most of its holdings have never been seen in this country. It's an exciting opportunity, particularly since there hasn't been a major museum show dedicated to Schiele in New York since the 1960s—which is not to dismiss the excel-

1 "Egon Schiele: The Leopold Collection, Vienna" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on October 12, 1997, and remains on view through January 4, 1998. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Magdalena Dabrowski and Rudolf Leopold, has been published by DuMont Buchverlag in association with the Museum of Modern Art, and is distributed by Yale University Press (363 pages, $60; $32.50 paper).

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lent, fairly small exhibitions mounted over the years by Galerie St. Etienne and by the late Serge Sabarsky. Yet the MOMA show makes Schiele seem both more and less interesting. His strengths are obvious almost from the start, but the sheer number of works makes his limitations more visible. The first half of the show is riveting, but after a while, Schiele's idiosyncrasies start to seem overly willful; personal style begins to look like manner.

At MOMA, the Leopold Collection is arranged chronologically, except for a single painting from 1910—a pivotal year in Schiele's development—wrenched out of sequence to confront visitors at the start. This atypically large, but typically fierce, nude self-portrait sets the emotional pitch for the rest of the exhibition. It's an uncomfortable picture, at once striking because of its elegant, dynamic adjustment of a slender, angular figure to a nearly square canvas, and repellent because of its uneasy combination of adolescent self-loathing and self-absorption. Schiele presents himself as essentially unappetizing, a skinny, bony, hairy creature with yellow and green flesh-tones, displayed like a specimen against a pale, neutral background. Yet he has clearly scrutinized and catalogued every nook and cranny of his long, thin body with the tireless regard of the narcissist. The liberties Schiele takes with his appearance make it obvious that the self-portrait is not intended as a naturalistic image, but as with many German Expressionist works of this period, the cropped, contorted limbs (hands, feet, and one forearm are missing) and the heightened color (livid flesh and a glowing red reserved for the eye, nipples, navel, and genitals) seem to have less to do with the demands of expressive composition than with explicit meaning; rather than formal imperatives, the chopped limbs suggest violence done to the figure; the acid color, illness.

The earliest works in the show, from Schiele's Academy years, are conventional enough, although they bear witness to his awareness of the stylizations and flat, Japanese-inspired patterns of Jugendstil. A 1908 gouache, however, the green-haired *Nude Boy on a Patterned Coverlet*, not only reveals Schiele's admiration for Klimt, but prefigures the distinctive character of the young artist's later works. The boy's pale body is rendered by the absence of paint; an angular silhouette of bare paper, sharply defined by the edges of the surrounding color patches, anticipates what Schiele would do with line in the future, when he was intelligent enough to jettison Klimt's claustrophobic patterning and define settings simply by the way he placed his figures on the page. The early works reveal Schiele's awareness of radical German painters of the day, such as Kokoschka, Kirchner, and Nolde, but it has been convincingly suggested that the strongest influence on the young artist was Rodin—specifically, his method of "continuous" drawing, a way of recording essential contours without lifting the pencil from the paper or the eye from the subject.

It's easy to understand why the urgency and freedom of this way of capturing fragments of the world would appeal to the rebellious young Austrian, both as a challenge to his conservative Academy training and as a way of possessing, without the intermediary of calculation, whatever his eye rested upon. Yet important as Rodin's example was to Schiele, it's obvious that unlike the French master, whose best, wholly spontaneous drawings are barely contained by the page, the younger artist was always acutely conscious of placement and composition, no matter how abandoned his imagery. As well, Schiele's staccato line, with its nervy stops and starts, is quite different from Rodin's fluid sweep. Rodin's line responds to the body's movement through space, while Schiele's line diagrams the intensity of his feelings and the ferocious concentration he expends on the act of drawing.

In Schiele's self-portraits, he grimaces and gestures, twisting his head or peering under a raised arm, to be able to watch himself,

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insistently reminding us of that unavoidable device, the mirror. Many self-portraitists have gone to great lengths to disguise the mirror, so that it survives only as a memory or in a reversal of right- and left-handedness, but Schiele never lets us forget that he is actively engaged in looking. He is unequivocally there, staring, in the still shocking drawings and gouaches of young girls and women stripped to their stockings and chemises—reclining, squatting, spread-legged, offering their buttocks and their sex to his greedy gaze. These writhing figures are deliberately posed. Whether they stare out from the page or turn away, they are clearly aware of the artist's presence and by extension, the viewer's, so that some sort of complicity is implied. The low, uncouthly close viewpoint, the aggressive cropping, and the way the models frankly display themselves all conspire to underscore both the artifice of the situation and the fact of the artist's presence.

At the same time, brutalizing details—hairy armpits, knobby knees, jutting hips, genitals rendered more precisely than facial features—counteract the mannerism of Schiele's drawing style and remind us, once again, of the real, uncompromising scrutiny that underlies these deliberately rude works. This aura of theatrical self-consciousness has a lot to do with why Schiele's drawings can be so disturbing. There are some (not in the Leopold Collection) in which a lanky, naked Schiele interrupts his attentions to a voluptuous, naked woman to draw them both, awkwardly posed, in bed. (The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, has one of the best of these; once you've seen it, you'll always wonder about those low viewpoints.)

The narcissistic, relentless specificity—which is not the same as realism—of Schiele's strongest figure drawings in the Leopold Collection sharply contrasts with the generalizations of his paintings, which are usually landscapes and cityscapes, or symbolic figures. Subject may explain this, since Schiele's drawings of cityscapes and interiors, while accomplished, lack the astringency of his avidly observed nudes and self-portraits, but medium seems to count, as well. The canvases, whatever their subject, are as a group less successful, less audacious, and less original than the works on paper. Their paint application seems stylized and uninspired, as does their color, in comparison to the vital line and nuanced hues of Schiele's watercolors and gouaches. It's not unusual for young painters to be more adept and daring on paper than on canvas, since the high cost of painting materials, relative to the cheapness of paper and drawing media, can be inhibiting; so can the difference between a large stretched canvas and an intimate sheet of paper, or between the way materials "sit up" on paper and the way the tooth of even well-primed canvas grabs whatever is applied. But the disparity between Schiele's works on paper and his paintings seems a function of something other than the physical characteristics of the media. His drawings and gouaches are figuratively, as well as often literally, naked. For all the adolescent self-consciousness of their imagery and for all their stylization, Schiele's works on paper are direct and forthright; they declare—in a loud voice—not only his fascination with self and sex, but his exasperation with the hypocrisy of polite Austrian society. The paintings are noticeably tamer, as though they had been conceived to satisfy a more general, public audience.

It's difficult even to speculate about the direction Schiele's work might have taken, had he lived longer. It seems clear that he knew what his German contemporaries were doing, but there's little to indicate that he was interested in French modernism from the crucial years before the First World War. (The connection between his brownish, patchwork landscapes and Cubism seems to me tenuous at best.) The drawings, gouaches, and especially the canvases, from the last years of Schiele's life, suggest that he was becoming more conservative, rather than less. After about 1915, the edgy drawing and fevered eroticism of the preceding years

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seem to subside. Even in the drawings of nude and half-dressed women, the searching, jagged profiles and genuinely startling images of the works from between 1910 and 1915 give way to a schematic, albeit tremulous line and overly complicated poses. Even when Schiele is in peak, impassioned form, his line remains largely a surface flourish—its directional shifts rarely evoke three-dimensional masses in space in the way, say, Matisse's line always does—and this surface emphasis becomes more pronounced in the last works, paradoxically at the same time that Schiele seems to have been striving for greater naturalism. The last large figure paintings in the Leopold Collection, one left unfinished, suggest that by the end of his twenties, Schiele had begun to grow up a little, to become interested in a more classical, less overtly raunchy notion of the female body. Unfortunately, they're not very good pictures. The bite of the earlier works has vanished, and there's not enough formal invention to compensate for its loss. But we'll never know where they might have gone.

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Poems
by Jessica Hornik & Jonathan Musgrove

Brilliant

i. First thought
The leaves are in their retirement. For some, it's the best
time of life: a free fall, or free-for-all, having paid one's dues
and—albeit less than cordially—shaken hands
with mortality. And what a show, the leaves' late coloratura!

ii. Second thought
By the mill in Broadalbin, at the pond's ardent request,
leaves step into the role of autumn water lilies, adrift in twos
and threes on lily pads of cloud. A crowd of evergreens stands
in the first ring, not leaving. Nor do I, the reviewer.

—Jessica Hornik

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Mule

On the night you died I had a dream.

I was walking a road, through a forest.
A grotesque, waxing moon made the crushed stone,
and faintly sparkling stonedust, moon white.
The road was full of ruts and dips, yet, still,
embedded stones made it smooth like snake skin;
smooth for a road that should never be paved.

I came upon my mule, lying on its
side, still breathing. No cuts or abrasions
made obvious, I knew she lay dying.
Starting between her ears, I ran my hand
down the length of her spine, down the slope
made deep by my too-heavy saddle.

She had carried me since my birth, her hooves
thick and cracked, like an old woman's toenails.
My trembling hands slid across the grate
of her ribs where my legs once held so tight.
Kneeling down on stones the pain increased then
relaxed as I laid my head on her neck.

Could she hear me praying, my voice so weak,
my breathing slowed down to match hers, could she?
Her breathing, clumsy, stopped; some fantastic
machine, with accordion bellows
and huge exposed gears, lurching to a halt.
I kissed her forehead then quickly turned away.

The waxing moon, no longer grotesque,
lighted the spaces between the shadows.
I sat on a fallen tree, watched the moon rise
almost directly above my head, bright,
surrounded by a halo, triumphant.
I saw the slow, beautiful ascension.

—Jonathan Musgrove

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Broadcast

for Josephine Jacobsen

We stood beside a road as twilight called
them skyward from stubble of finished corn-
fields, moments ahead of coming frost.
Upon ascension, the cry of geese
like many horns, distinct, gathered; a force
containing not only these, echoing
all that had ever traveled this flyway.

They rushed on, over streams, rivers, and bays,
following a map that need not be drawn,
too ancient and deep to bubble up
like a spring, flood conscious memory.
Each carried along by a code of sounds;
the deciphered rhythm of iambic
wingbeats, and the deafening cry, *It's time!*

Listening in the last of twilight,
she said, *Something has put this charge into*
the air. It vibrates, coiled now like a snake
to wait a thousand years if need be.
The old lesson proclaimed: nothing is lost.
With sound vibrating my soul, my center,
I offered my voice, my trumpet, to theirs.

—Jonathan Musgrove

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Theater

Muddled "marivaudage"

by Mark Steyn

As we approach the new millennium, many of us are finding it hard not to preface even the most footling observation with "As we approach the new millennium," the cliché of choice for those already halfway across that bridge to the twenty-first century. On the eve of a new millennium, a few of us are whiling away the dying hours of the old millennium by savoring the most delicious deployments of this formulation. My favorite to date came the other day from the director-choreographer Tommy Tune. Asked about the more graphic passages of his autobiography, he remarked: "As we head toward the millennium, it just seemed coy to act like you don't have a penis."

Cut out that sentence, and save it for when your great-grandchildren ask you what the *fin de siècle* was like. Tune's remark should not be seen merely as a claim to the millennial significance of his own particular penis but rather as a superb distillation of the narcissism of the age. As manifested in everything from no-fault divorces to noisy self-outing, sex and sexuality have less and less to do with attracting someone else and more and more to do with celebrating oneself. Sex is about being true to yourself, a cause for pride, a reason to parade down Fifth Avenue.

Perhaps in time this peculiar autoeroticism will accumulate a body of great stage work, with as many conventions as Feydeau. For the moment, though, the long shadow of Tommy Tune's emblematic penis seems only to have blinded us to the sensibilities of earlier times. Our age respects any and all sexual identities, except those of our predecessors. So we take it for granted that a Coward revival will draw out the homoerotic sub-text, even though the defining characteristic of Coward is that he doesn't go in for sub-text, whatever its sexual orientation, and the director and cast would be better off applying themselves to the glittering surface wherein the real drama lies. There is, at least, a kind of logic to this: Coward enjoyed sex with men; therefore, he must be interpreted in the light of contemporary gay identity. (Act Two of Moises Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, at the Minetta Lane Theatre, opens with a dramatized debate between the playwright and a Wilde scholar on this very subject.) But the approach is now so ubiquitous it disfigures even *Thérèse Raquin*, whose production by the Classic Stage Company takes all the original's subtleties and insights and substitutes a coarse sexual exhibitionism.

I was at a theater conference in London a few years ago when someone at the back of the room stood up and began, "As the author of *Thérèse Raquin*. . . ." We all turned round and craned our necks, since it's not every day that Emile Zola shows up at these things. In fact, the fellow turned out to be the author of a musical adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin*. So it should be pointed out that

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the current *Thérèse* is a dramatization by Neal Bell. Even so, why would he go to the trouble of adapting a work he seems so out of sympathy with? Stripped of Zola's psychological investigation, the characters and setting and plot are not especially interesting—and, in any case, the characterizations and (much of) the acting and the sets and costumes are just abysmal.

The same question is prompted by the musicalized Marivaux at the Royale. *Triumph of Love* is adapted from Marivaux's hit of 1732, *The Triumph of Love*. I don't know what happened to the *The*. Presumably, it was cut in previews, or New Haven, or a focus group reacted negatively to it. But the lack of the definite article is not inappropriate in a production that has no very definite idea of what it's meant to be doing. On the other hand, *Triumph* and *Love* are not much in evidence either, which doesn't leave much except *of*. The alarm bells start before curtain up, literally. The opulent gold curtain whose folds sprawl languorously into the orchestra is ravishing. Those of us who miss curtains, and despair at the way so many plays now begin with the audience shuffling in and spending ten minutes looking at the empty set, should be grateful to the designer, Heidi Ettinger. But the heaviness of those folds, the curtain's careless prodigality: they surely are the very antithesis of Marivaux. In France, going one better than the adjectival immortality of Kafka or Pinter, the playwright became a noun, *marivaudage*, a not always complimentary term coined by his contemporaries for the flirtatious, inconsequential accumulations through which advance his characters' feelings. Marivaux's dialogue is delicate, trembling on the brink of affected. But, at its finest, no one better conveys the burgeoning of love, however unintended or unwelcome. It's that lightly worn, almost imperceptibly spun, gossamer that's the essence of Marivaux. It is, in its fragile way, very musical. But, as with Rostand (while we're on the subject of French dramatists), you have to distinguish between those plays which can be transported by music, such as *The Romanesques*, which became the eternally running *Fantasticks*, and those which are already so musical there's nothing to be gained by adding real music, such as *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which has been the subject of redundant musicalizations by everyone from obscure Dutch opera composers to Anthony Burgess since its premiere exactly a century ago.

Le Triomphe de l'amour (1732) is not prime Marivaux, which is no bad thing from an adaptor's point of view, though it shares the concern of his finest plays: the melting of icy hearts. In the mythical kingdom of Sparta, the philosopher Hermocrates, his sister Hesione, and their nephew Agis live cerebral, chaste lives until the Princess Léonide comes along and, in different disguises (two female, one male), persuades all three rigorously rational beings to fall head over heels for her. Having gained admission to Hermocrates' cloisters as a boy called Phocion, Léonide finds herself posing to Agis as the waiflike Cecile, and to the old man as the bimbo Aspasie. For much of the play, the Princess is simultaneously playing both sexes and up to four roles. Matters are further complicated by the fact that, though Léonide reigns in Sparta, the throne rightfully belongs to Agis, who has pledged not only to end the Princess's rule of *amour* but to do so by assassination. Thus, at one point, Léonide, disguised, finds herself joining a conspiracy to kill herself.

In his translation of the play for the above-mentioned Classic Stage Company a year or two back, James Magruder stuck reasonably close to the original, though personally I preferred the version by Guy Callan staged in London in 1987: Magruder seemed at times to be pining for the more heartless geometry of Schnitzler or, at any rate, Beaumarchais. Undeniably, however, the production was, in off-Broadway terms, a hit, and not content with that success, Magruder and his director Michael Mayer decided to sign up composers, lyricists, choreographers, et al. and use it as a springboard to a full-blown Broadway musical.

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When George Abbott turned *The Comedy of Errors* into *The Boys from Syracuse* in 1936, he didn't retain a single line from the original, except one: a seeress declares, "The venom clamours of a jealous woman poisons more deadly than a mad dog's tooth." Immediately, one of the Dromios leaps from the wings and exclaims, "Shakespeare!" It's quintessentially Abbott; he felt the line couldn't be beat, but he also knew how to use it: so the lowbrows of Broadway doff their caps to the highbrow bard of Avon, honoring the source material by disparaging their own lower ambitions. It's a false modesty: Abbott's version is, in several respects, superior to Shakespeare's, plus it has a Rodgers and Hart score—which is why, ever since then, productions of *The Comedy* have always given the impression they'd much rather be doing the musical. But it's a pose that sums up Broadway at its confident best: a kind of erudite philistinism. Cole Porter caught it a decade later in *Kiss Me, Kate*, supplying his two gangsters with a rollicking Bowery waltz dedicated to the proposition that the best way to pick up chicks is to quote the Bard:

> Just declaim a few lines from *Otheller*
> And they'll think you're a helluva feller. . . .
>
> With the wife of the British Embessida
> Try a crack out of *Troilus and Cressida*. . . .

In one of the more obvious signals of the type of show *Triumph* wants to be, two of Hermocrates' lackeys, his valet Harlequin and his gardener Dimas, sing "Henchmen Are Forgotten," a vaudevillian catalogue of history's forgotten flunkys:

> Who stood in for Midas
> When Midas got arthridas. . . ?
>
> Who convinced Medusa
> Her perm looked better loosa?

Everything about this scene aspires to the equivalent scene with the equivalent duet for the equivalent menials in *Kiss Me, Kate*. Unfortunately, this Porteresque laundry list has two disadvantages: a lame title, and a nondescript tune. As far as the score goes, the lyricist, Susan Birkenhead, emerges with more laurels than the composer, Jeffrey Stock. But there's a limit to how good a lyricist can be without the tunes, and Miss Birkenhead, for whose previous work I have a great deal of admiration, is stymied here. That said, I wonder if the score's strange indecisiveness isn't mostly due to the confused signals sent by Magruder's book. The mock-reverence of Abbott's "Shakespeare!" and Porter's "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" is charming and flattering; Magruder, attempting similar acknowledgements, winds up simultaneously condescending to his source material, his new form, and his target audience.

The best example is Léonide's maid, Corine. In the original, she, like her mistress, adopts male garb and calls herself Hermidas. In Magruder's version, she calls herself Troy. And, at the back of your mind, midst all the confusion, you keep wondering about the logic behind the change of name. The pay-off comes later, when she attempts to enlist Harlequin and Dimas in a "ménage à Troy."

"Ménage à Troy": the dull thud as this aperçu fell to the stage and rolled forlornly over the footlights to sink into the welcoming oblivion of the orchestra pit is worth savoring. Why isn't it funny? Well, because a pun doesn't count if it depends on inserting a fake and unlikely name adopted for no other purpose than enabling a pun. As Robert Frost said of free verse, it's like playing tennis with the net down—and even low comedy has its disciplines. But Magruder is nothing if not persistent: as Troy—or Corine—pursues Harlequin, she says, "It's time for a Harlequin romance"—enlisting the crutch of lame anachronism for these bogus puns.

Magruder, we're told, has a doctorate in French. The evidence for it rests mainly on his determination to shoehorn in every French phrase (like ménage à trois) known

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in English, a thoroughness which extends even unto: "I think you'd better cure this girl-child, master. Give her the oo-la-la." Give her the oo-la-la? Cole Porter, to whom *Triumph*, consciously or not, seems to keep snaking back, wrote a song called "Give Him the Oo-La-La" for *Dubarry Was a Lady*. But this was a show in which Bert Lahr played a washroom attendant at a faux-French nightclub who dreams that he's Louis XV and the club's singer (Ethel Merman) is DuBarry. It is, therefore, a raucously contemporary American romp through French history, and both the anachronisms and the tourist's-eye view are appropriate. Magruder's justification is harder to fathom. *Le Triomphe de l'amour* is not a piece like *Can-Can*, planted firmly in the center of French culture's most indestructible clichés; it's not even set in France, but rather in the land of Sparta. The generic Frenchyisms are there, it would appear, for no other reason than that the dramatist was a French national.

On that basis, presumably Magruder would do the same to Voltaire or Zola or Rostand or Dumas or Edith Piaf. It's a measure of how far we've slumped since *Dubarry Was a Lady* that the poor misguided adapters should feel obliged to do this. Slowly, remorselessly, the stately poise of Marivaux is undermined by the surrounding trouser-droppers. You cannot expect a soufflé to rise if you weight it down with cow dung. Let us tactfully pass over the phalanx of phallic gags, except to note that, as we head toward the millennium, Tommy Tune's is not the only penis jostling for our attention.

Inevitably, Magruder's miscalculations of tone are magnified by his collaborators. So Michael Mayer, who stumbles from one inept directing decision to other, has chosen to wedge Hermocrates and Hesione into ludicrous Louis XV costume-ball frillies. *Triumph* is supposed to be an "intimate" musical play, an antidote to the fustian excesses of *Phantom* or *Jekyll and Hyde*, so it takes place on a unit set. The unit in question is a topiaried garden, but even the set can't resist the same mugging as the dud puns: it's supposed to be shrubbery, but, as it's constructed of planks covered in green cloths, the seven-member cast also gets to frolic around on it. Once in a while, the shrubs fly open and plastic flowers pop up —not the *Triumph of Love* but the negation of it. Richard Rodgers once said that, in a successful show, the orchestrations sound like the costumes look. Nothing so coherent for these fellows: it's a wannabe-Sondheim score sung by what looks like an amateur operatic company of *Fledermaus* trying to approximate the stage business of *No Sex, Please, We're British* on the set of "Sesame Street." It certainly doesn't look or sound like Marivaux.

The cast have their work cut out making any sense of this. Susan Egan's Léonide is pleasingly boyish or girlish as required, but is gauche and dogged rather than enchanting. Christopher Sieber's Agis is a clod who'd be more at home in a posing pouch on a California beach. As Hermocrates, F. Murray Abraham seesaws erratically between his usual scenery-chewing and an uncharacteristic sheepishness, deriving possibly from his inability to sing. As Hesione, Betty Buckley is humiliated in every conceivable way by her authors, costumers, and stagers, but, when she sings, her wryly tender voice is a lone, plaintive evocation of the spirit of Marivaux.

Perhaps it's perverse to dwell, in a crowded New York season, on this show's failings. But, alone among Broadway's incoming musicals, *Triumph* is a comedy, and comedy, musical or not, is almost dead on the Great White Way. *Triumph* is also the kind of piece everyone says they want to see: small-scale, human, witty. And, in the end, for better or worse, theater is mostly the art of adaptation. When an adaptation goes as badly wrong as this one, it doesn't bode well. In choosing to adapt the play's mechanics—the cross-dressing, et al.—rather than the play's emotional impulses, Magruder has ended up with a heartless farce whose avoidance of any feeling would mys-

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tify Marivaux. If nothing else, the playwright would wonder why his adaptor, for all his expertise in French culture, seems unable to distinguish between himself and Feydeau or Beaumarchais. The whole dumbed-down process demonstrates a weird lack of faith in the ability of the theater to create and draw you into a world that exists on its own terms. Good adaptation grows organically from the material, and, on that basis, musicalizing Marivaux shouldn't be that difficult. *Marivaudage* isn't so very far removed from conversational, narrow-ranged American song: think of the rueful banter of "Thanks for the Memory" and "Two Sleepy People."

A Lee Atwater rock musical mightn't be a bad idea. In the meantime, Robert Myers's one-man play *Atwater: Fixin' to Die* (recently at the 28th Street Theatre) will have to do. In seventy-five minutes, Myers hits the high spots of Atwater's short life —his college days touting porno movies, his early campaigns, his chairmanship of the Republican National Committee, his discovery of Willie Horton, and the final terrible illness leading to his recantation. Along the way, he brandishes his electric guitar and urinates very noisily just to the left of the guy on the end of the second row. Myers is several miles to the left of Atwater but seems to have wound up falling in love with his subject. Easy to do, especially given the charismatic performance by Bruce McIntosh: it's very unusual, especially in a one-man show, to be in the presence of someone confident enough not to care whether you like them or not.

Of course, the more he disdains to be liked, the more you like him, though Myers does his best to saddle Atwater with the usual baggage beloved by liberal dramatists. An inordinate amount of attention is paid to David Duke, a marginal figure in Republican politics. By contrast, Al Sharpton, say, isn't in the least bit marginal in New York Democratic politics, but no dramatist seems to regard him as emblematic of liberal opinion.

Heigh-ho. McIntosh's Atwater gleefully embraces his vilification, to the point where the play begins to seem like a grand celebration of him. After coming up with "Read my lips: no new taxes" for George Bush, he notes that "the ironic thing is, Bush literally didn't have any lips." Atwater is glamorous and mischievous, an irresistible combination on stage whatever the problems it may present in real life. Otherwise, most of the crasser partisanship is left to the characterizations of the supporting players: the play's directed by George Furth, the author and librettist, who represents the likes of Reagan and Quayle with cardboard cutouts. This seems fair enough, given that that's how Myers seems to think of them: Quayle's a bimbo, Reagan's a dozing moron, etc. Bleeding-heart liberal or ferocious right-wing bastard, any self-respecting dramatist surely ought to eschew the latter jest on the grounds of its utter staleness. As we approach the millennium, some things never change.

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Art

Persevering in paint: Steve Wheeler & Thomas Nozkowski

by Mario Naves

In 1947 the painter Steve Wheeler (1912–1992) published *Hello Steve*, a book of his own silk-screen prints. Writing under the pseudonym "Adam Gates," Wheeler contributed an essay on the work that, once read, is not easily forgotten. Although there is plenty to learn about his art from the essay "Face to Face," it is less significant for what it says than for how it is said. Jargon like "dura-spatial" and axioms like "assertion bows to soliloquy" make it tough reading; Wheeler's chip-on-the-shoulder tone doesn't help either. Yet "Face to Face" is a vivid transcription of the work. Wheeler's prose is simultaneously portentous and slangy, irritable and joyous, well-reasoned and over-the-top. And it is driven: "A square of cement, twenty thousand buildings, sixty thousand windows, nine hundred and ninety zillion bricks, one I-beam, a figure, everything is here, NOW!" What's remarkable is not how rarely Wheeler achieved this manic density in his art, but that he achieved it at all.

"Steve Wheeler: The Oracle Visiting the Twentieth Century" is the first museum exhibition of this little known artist.[1] In an era of museological overkill, Wheeler's retrospective is refreshing in its propriety. While the show's title—based, in fact, on a Wheeler watercolor from 1943—sounds exorbitant, the co-curators, Gail Stavitsky and Twig Johnson, are nothing if not level-headed. They know that most artists can't withstand a blockbuster. They also know that there are—how does one put it?—just plain *good* artists whose work is undervalued. So it is with Wheeler. In their presentation of Wheeler's paintings, watercolors, and prints, Stavitsky and Johnson give us his development, context, influences, and achievement neatly and with zero malarkey. They show us what makes him special. That is all any artist could ask for.

Whether Wheeler would have thought this the case is open to question. A control freak before the term was coined, Wheeler insisted on the absolute uniqueness of his art. He disavowed having been influenced by Native American art—a claim that tells us much about Wheeler's capacity for self-denial—and when lumped with the Indian Space painters group objected vociferously. (Writing as "Adam Gates" was but one of several attempts at thwarting such "misconception.") His erratic behavior made him the bane of friends, artists, critics, and dealers. By the time Abstract Expressionism—or, as Wheeler dubbed it, "Hack-tion painting"—established itself as a cultural force, Wheeler became increasingly bitter at his lack of exposure. He painted less, bet on the horses more, and turned into something

1 "Steve Wheeler: The Oracle Visiting the Twentieth Century" opened at the Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey, on September 30, 1997, and remains on view through January 4, 1998. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Montclair Art Museum (48 pages, $13 paper).

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of a recluse. As his paintings were being rediscovered in the Eighties and Nineties, Wheeler's irascibility rendered him, as one dealer had it, "impossible to deal with." History has its own slights, but Wheeler's obscurity was, one feels, largely of his own making.

What makes Wheeler an appealing figure for rediscovery is his standing as an underdog and outsider. He can be seen as such in his relationship (or lack of one) with the New York School, as well as in the cloistered intensity of his paintings which can be reminiscent of folk art. While he may have been a peripheral figure in the art world of the Forties and Fifties, he was no rube. He studied at the Art Students League and with Hans Hofmann. (Four Hofmannesque studies in space and structure were on view this fall in "Steve Wheeler: The Formative Years (1938–1942)" at Snyder Fine Art, New York.) One sees in his work the longing for a distinctively American art that also typifies early Ab Ex painting. Certainly, his fascination with the primordial, the mythic, and the art of "primitive" societies—as well as an esteem for European modernism—is related to the work of, for example, Adolph Gottlieb.

Looking at the craggy biomorphs that populate his small tempera pieces circa 1942, one sees Wheeler working through Cubism, Surrealism, Klee, Miró, and American Indian art in a manner that is almost poignant in its ambition. It was not until the mid-Forties, however, that Wheeler pushed his art beyond pastiche. Up until then, his melding of figuration and abstraction had been jerry-rigged; one can all but see the seams patching together his disparate influences in *The Gold Cord* (c. 1943). Wheeler's breakthrough painting, as seen at Montclair, was the Whitney's *Laughing Boy Rolling* (1946). Here all the typical Wheeler elements—masklike faces, chunky all-over rhythms, and a feverish attention to detail—cohere, whereas previously they were flabby. Wheeler may have quit his studies with Hofmann because he wanted to be "an artist rather than a good painter," but *Laughing Boy Rolling* succeeds precisely because of its dynamism as painting. It is anchored by a shifting, Cubist space which tightens (and heightens) the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't play of Wheeler's totems and their puzzlelike environment. At this point, the exhibition ceased to be about a sophisticated enthusiast rather than the hyperactive—and sometimes psychedelic—life of art.

Wheeler's mature paintings never completely transcend their recondite nature. They lack the expansiveness of Miró or the iconic surety of the designs found on an object included in the exhibition: a storage box (c. 1890) made by the Tlingit Chilkat tribe. The cranky insularity of Wheeler's kaleidoscopic universe is both its chief asset and its liability. Yet his best paintings—*Laughing Boy* (1949), *Young Man Not Afraid to Talk to his Mother-in-law* (c. 1950s), *Arkansas Traveler* (c. 1950–75), and *Little Joe Picking His Nose* (c. 1950–75)—are buoyant and funny. They pull us into their pressurized worlds, and we delight in their conundrums. Their compacted space and mechanized involution may mark them as urban paintings, but they have the inevitability of a folk tale. "Who has painted it before?" Wheeler once asked. He answered himself in talking about Northwest Coast Indian art: "God damn, these guys have already done what I've been doing . . . you recreate the experience of the ages all over again without really knowing it. . . ." I once wrongly dismissed Wheeler as "little more than a gifted amateur." He is more than that. With "The Oracle Visiting the Twentieth Century," Stavitsky and Johnson have done well by this feisty artist.

The Montclair Art Museum must be commended for mounting an exhibition that neither lends itself to the mandates of the box office or the vagaries of fashion—Wheeler's multicultural propensities, for instance, are too universal to have much pull for ideologues. "The Oracle Visiting the Twentieth Century" is the kind of offbeat, even risky, exhibition that seems increas-

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ingly to occur outside of the Manhattan museum loop. (The galleries have a better record in this respect.)

The same might be said of the beautiful show of Thomas Nozkowski's abstractions, "Twenty-Four Paintings," seen this fall at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.[2] Unlike Wheeler, Nozkowski is a known quantity in the art world with an ardent, if inconspicuous, coterie of fans. He has had regular gallery exhibitions over the past eighteen years and been written about in the art magazines. While not an art star, Nozkowski is, as Peter Schjeldahl writes in the catalogue, "right in the flow." So why wasn't this show seen in New York City? That New Yorkers had to travel to the nation's capital to see the first major museum exhibition of one of their finest painters is an altogether unsurprising irony.

Less a mid-career retrospective than a retrospective of the artist's mid-career, "Twenty-Four Paintings" was just that: two dozen works created over the last nine years. The show consisted of Nozkowski's signature sixteen-by-twenty-inch horizontally oriented paintings. His stubborn insistence on this format has always seemed innately practical—particularly in terms of storage space. It is interesting to learn that it has a democratic mien as well. The paintings are scaled, as the artist has it, "for people's rooms." (Whether they are priced at the scale of their pocketbooks is another matter.) I admire this nod to the realities of how most people live—and live with art. I also agree with the assertion that it is a "mistaken idea" that the only good—or, rather, major—painting is a large one. This may be an obvious truth, but "bigness" is insidiously pervasive. Given the acres of canvas wasted in the service of bad painting, all I can say is, Amen.

Nozkowski's format suits the quirkiness of his formal vocabulary and impels us to come close to its surface. His paintings, with their bumptious biomorphs and off-kilter geometries, reward such scrutiny. Each one is the result of months, and sometimes years, of working and reworking an image. Shapes, colors, and spaces are stated, altered, tweaked, and forsaken. Throughout this process Nozkowski scrapes, sands, or washes down his surfaces, sometimes to the weave of the canvas. In doing so, the various states of the painting are obscured and excavated; they also intermingle. Nozkowski continues working until the basics of a painting reveal themselves. They are then delineated on a ground that is, so to speak, its own history. At times, one can almost follow the step-by-step procedure Nozkowski has taken to arrive at a given result. We see how forms and spaces have been spliced and tucked together. In his best paintings, however, the image mutates right before our eyes. Their malleability is uncanny. Nozkowski's paintings are as resolute as they are elastic.

Each painting offers an image, often heraldic in nature, wherein an event or object fits inside another. In one painting—all of them are untitled—it is a series of rectangles scuttling through a tube; in another, curving green stripes lace through a torso-like form. Nozkowski's shapes have been pushed, pinched, and pulled. He thrives on the contradictions of pictorial facture. The dialogue between positive and negative space is not just a formal exercise for Nozkowski, but an occasion for complicating an already elusive game. So, as much as one of his blips has been nudged into shape, it nudges right back. While these forms recall William Baziotes' stylish glyphs—there's a smidgen of de Kooning in the mix as well—they don't have much personality as such. They do, however, have a peculiar pictorial

2 "Thomas Nozkowski: Twenty-Four Paintings" opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., on September 1, 1997, and closed on November 1. The exhibition will reopen at the Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, on January 15, 1998, and remain on view through March 1. A catalogue of the exhibition, by Jack Cowart, David Moos, and Peter Schjeldahl, has been published by the Corcoran Gallery (64 pages, $16).

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drive and are a source of comedy, albeit of a deadpan variety. On first glance, Nozkowski's work can seem tasteful and aloof; on repeated viewing, its rigor and wit unfold. The paintings don't stop. Isn't that what we expect from art?

An artist of my acquaintance wonders whether Nozkowski's abraded surfaces are too good to be true; whether they are manipulated, in the manner of a faux-finish house painter, rather than arrived at. I have my suspicions as well. Nozkowski's use of the unifying wash of paint, as in an orange, black, and white canvas from 1990, can seem pat. Yet that same piece, an abrupt encounter between disparate geometries, is a stunner. When he's on, Nozkowski makes such complaints trivial. The choice paintings here were, one feels, genuinely surprising to the artist, and that sense of discovery engages us. Nozkowski's gift is making this hard-won surprise as natural as breathing. Of the two dozen works at the Corcoran, only six or so really held up. But the cumulative impact of all twenty-four made a persuasive case for Nozkowski's singular vision. Besides, one out of four ain't bad. In his own understated way, Thomas Nozkowski has been painting some of the most satisfying—and satisfyingly curious—paintings of our time.

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Dance

Computer games: Merce Cunningham at BAM

by Laura Jacobs

In 1940, Martha Graham choreographed *El Penitente* and cast Erick Hawkins, her handsome heartthrob, as The Penitent. The young Merce Cunningham was a Christ figure. That same year, Graham choreographed her Emily Dickinson dance, *Letter to the World,* and cast Hawkins as The Dark Beloved. Cunningham was the poet's elfin wit. In 1944, Graham choreographed *Appalachian Spring* and cast Hawkins as The Bridegroom. Cunningham was a preacher.

Graham may have been concentrating hard on Hawkins, who was indeed her dark beloved and eventual (if skittish) bridegroom, but her take on Cunningham is the more piercing portrait. Christ figure, cool humorist, guru—all true. Cunningham would leave Graham's company in 1945, would head to Black Mountain College with John Cage where, in a forty-days-forty-nights kind of immersion (actually about two years), they would create an aesthetic that was antithetical to Graham theatrics (and far more lighthearted), and would do nothing less than redefine purity in the theater, trading impulse for pulse, and feeling for seeing. Here at the end of the twentieth century, after more than forty years of dance-making, Cunningham is still a visionary. While the great Paul Taylor, in his rippling universe of leaping Manichean extremes, moral solstice and eclipse, plays God in his repertory, Cunningham plays Consciousness.

In other words, he plays. What Cunningham and Cage fixed on so early, finally, and threateningly, was the notion that the toss of a coin, the roll of the dice, the reading of tea leaves or the *I Ching*, was as viable a way to organize a dance as any other way. Chance was God. Chance was opportunity, the orange card in the board game—a "chance" to escape the monopoly of ingrained or clichéd artistic strategies. The scholar Roger Copeland, at work on a book called *Cunningham's Legacy*, puts it thus: "Cunningham remains skeptical about the role that 'natural' and unconscious impulses play in the creative process. . . . Indeed, Cunningham makes a point of resisting his own 'instinctive' preferences (which is to say: the preferences that *feel* natural)." He isn't into the power of id, or the auteur's omnipotence. In fact, in her 1991 biography of Martha Graham, Agnes de Mille recalls that Cunningham did not care for his role as the preacher in *Appalachian Spring*, and, in the solo he himself choreographed, "showed more anger than was needed." One wonders: was he already uncomfortable with the artist's Promethean reach, or too comfortable with it? (No one has ever accused Cunningham of being simple.)

And so the choreographic elements of a Cunningham dance (the order of pre-choreographed sections, the length of those sections, the number of dancers in sections, etc.) were decided upon by alien or arbitrary forces. Likewise, the composer and the designers did their work in the dark, without

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epiphanal jam sessions on what it all was meant to express. Not until performance did the elements inhabit the same time and space, did the dancer hear the music (they knew the dance by counting) and wear the costumes. It was as if the dance had a mind of its own beyond Cunningham and his collaborators. Obviously, this creational void sitting at the back of each work made critics nervous. How do you review chance?

Forty years later, critics are still trying to answer the question. On the last day of Cunningham's week-long October engagement at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, part of this year's Next Wave Festival, a panel called "Writing About Merce" was convened.[1] The problems discussed were easy to identify with, for writer and watcher alike. Take the absence of conventional music, aural structures that would cue you to where you are in a piece—this makes it difficult to remember steps, to fix them in a phrase. (It can also scare you into thinking the dance will never end.) And all those chance operations—they seem to wave away a committed analysis of a work. And if you do impose autobiography or allegory or metaphor on a work, are you not betraying it? Yet, during an intermission chat I had with Douglas Dunn, one of Cunningham's first and most famous dancers, Dunn complained that critics never write about what the dances *mean*.

This anxiety about meaning is like an X factor at the core of Cunningham, an oscillating unknown in the mathematical formula (a sensation of higher math pervades both steps and sound, as so many of the scores consist of electronic oscillations and waves—E=merce^2). A dance from 1989 called *Cargo X* could be a little key to Cunningham. In it, a backstage ladder brought on stage figures as, first, a prop—a ladder. It then begins to assume the iconic stature of an obelisk, exerting a pull on the dancers. Finally, as the dancers lay flowers on its rungs, that ladder has become a monument or tombstone. Cunningham's "cargo" is bodies and time and change. In short, life and death. But Cunningham would never say so.

The most beautiful of the four new dances on Cunningham's two BAM programs was *Installations*, a work from 1996 that plays, even puns, with an equation Cunningham walked away from when he walked away from Graham: the idea of art as church, an institution that "installs" spirit. As we all know by now, art installations tend to be big, empty spaces of nothing, usually with an electronic buzz piped in, often with a video screen nearby. Cunningham's *Installations* has a décor by Elliot Caplan: three banks of video-screens (each made of four or six screens) positioned asymmetrically around the stage; the backdrop is a graceful swath of curtain. Pieced together within each bank of screens is a looming, stone-gray video of a stone-still (but breathing) dancer. They're like refractions of the sculpted saints and angels you'd see in a cathedral—sculpture crossed with stained-glass—and they catch something of the height, the isolating scale, and sentience of cathedrals. Caplan's lighting drapes the dance in Vatican gradations of rust, garnet, grape; and Trimpin's score, at first art-museum minimal, gathers and grows throaty like organ chords, but chords played by the church cat lounging on the keys. When, amid a stageful of shadowy groupings, light falls on the feet of two dancers, each left foot tensed in the same demi-point position, it's nothing less than an Adoration. Again, forget the preacher; *Installations* is like eyes wandering —a mind wandering—during the sermon.

The hot dance on the program was the world premiere, *Scenario*, a must-see for the cutting-edge set because of its costumes

1 "Cunningham, Merce: Forward and Reverse," featuring the choreography of Merce Cunningham, was performed by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the Brooklyn Academy of Music from October 14, 1997, through October 19. Program A consisted of *Rondo*, a *BAMevent* comprising selections from earlier dances, and *Scenario*. Program B consisted of *Installations*, *Windows*, and a *BAMevent*.

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by Rei Kawakubo, founder of the fashion house Comme des Garçons. Kawakubo is that rarity, a truly avant-garde fashion designer. Disdainful of trends, her own as well as others', her mantra is "Starting From Zero"—she is constantly starting over or subverting the norm (for instance, she'll tinker with technology, loosen a screw in the weaving machines to get human imperfection, a human hand—chance—back into mass-produced fabric). As for shape, her three-armed sweater was a semiotician's dream.

The much-awaited costumes for *Scenario* were versions of dresses Kawakubo showed a year ago in her Spring 1996 collection or, as some of the fashion press called it, the "Quasimodo" collection. Its signature silhouette was a body-hugging stretch dress with extra fabric bunched and pulled over tuberous humps and bumps in odd places (*Artforum* went crazy for it). Kawakubo said she was exploring human shape, testing and freshening the eye. But, she continued, if you slipped the down-filled pads out of their fabric envelopes you were left with a perfectly conventional stretch dress. The costumes the Cunningham dancers wore were dresses made in blue-and-white stripes or sea-foam gingham, followed by a group dressed in black, then one in irradiated tomato. The shapes were Disney animation—as if someone had loosened a screw in *that* machine—and the dancers looked like erratic toadstools, had Mighty Mouse chests and Popeye muscles, and even Saturn rings wrung around midriffs. Kawakubo's set was a bare, white stage with high fluorescent lighting (a sort of ground zero).

The costumes stole the show. The first, colorful section suggested a tropical utopia, an undiscovered island of weird cultural signifiers, of Others dancing away. When the dancers came out in their black Kawakubos, I thought of French poodles groomed for show; or Victorian widows, their bustles askew; or the precarious black hair-buns of geishas; or Dior's New Look, with its fertility goddess swells. I had not considered just how ubiquitous bumps and humps are in fashion history, how natural to the landscape of artifice. Nor had I ever seen the Cunningham dancers look glamorous in quite this way—in a fashion context. The women's strong, slim, lower legs were suddenly gorgeous, feminine legs—eroticized. Gams.

But O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the costume? *Scenario* was difficult to see, literally, like watching a television in which the horizontal is out of whack with the vertical ("Do not attempt to adjust your television set . . ."). It was as if each dancer was moving within a sci-fi blur. Sit back and squint, and the stage picture was charming and bright, if untranslatable. Lean in and the dance was a bunch of arms and legs poking out of pillows—and poking out not very interestingly. What was clear is that we have powerful expectations regarding Cunningham dancers. We not only want to see their bodies, we need to. The articulation of the Cunningham mid-section (inner thigh, hip, waist, breastbone, clavicle)—so crisp, specific, sensitive, and solid—is the quick of Cunningham, the seat of his Senssurround perception. In *Scenario*, he wasn't all there.

Actually, the same could be said for all four of the new dances (the two other New York premieres were *Rondo,* which had a motif of "watching," and *Windows*, a rather ominous, inscrutable work with the color scheme of wet cement). Despite their various scores, palettes, and motifs, all four works were distant. All four were busy. Even *Installations*, so quietly lovely, was more a triumph of parts than of dance. None of these works had that sudden drop into intimacy that can make Cunningham seem the most wondrously sensual, the most listening, of choreographers (the illumination of two feet in *Installations* was about as intimate as it got.) None had that unpredictable pull, almost gravitational, into a pocket of concentration. This lack was brought into high relief by the *BAMevents* that were also on the program. Pieces of older dances elided together to make a new dance just for that

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evening, the *BAMevent*s included sections of dances from the 1950s through the 1980s. The concentration of forces, the focused muscularity, the sheer sense of involvement in these snippets presented quite a contrast. One felt the difference dimensionally, in the palpable zones of space around dancers, and theatrically, in the precision-burn of speed, in a leg monumentally upheld—leg as will. One also realized, with a bit of a jolt, that there were no memorable *pas de deux* in any of the new dances. (The *BAMevent* duet from *Un jour ou deux* of 1973—great chaste spirals and stillnesses—begged the question and left one longing for more).

The fact that John Cage died in 1992 may or may not have some bearing on the missing duets in the new Cunningham dances. The fact that Cunningham is now using Lifeforms, a computer program for choreographers, to create his dances and then to activate them (instead of dice or the *I Ching*), seems significant. Maybe you can review chance.

On paper, anyway, the distracted, disembodied quality of the four new dances certainly corresponds to the distracted, disembodied quality you get from pictures on computer screens. The carriage of arms, so exact in Cunningham, so classically placed and yet quirky, brainy, was inexact and rather lost in the atmosphere. A fellow critic and avid Merce watcher was extremely bothered by those arms, and suggested that *port de bras* on the computer screen may be correspondingly inexact, a problem compounded by Cunningham's not making the dances on his own body anymore.

We have watched Cunningham, who is now seventy-eight, age within his dances, and it has been a fascinating, funny, and sometimes unsettling experience. He has never tried to do physically what he cannot, the way Rudolf Nureyev used to (Nureyev, who relished the role of Preacher in Graham's *Appalachian Spring*). He has used his older self choreographically, to make comments—humorous, sarcastic, sage, sad—on his position as aging master among young bodies. But watching Cunningham's physicality pass out of his dance-making, taking with it that tough muscular intelligence, that acute attunement to pitches beyond the rest of us, is adjustment of another order. Cunningham, however, would probably say it's all in the game.

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Music

Kurt Masur conducts Brahms

by James F. Penrose

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) had lived over two-thirds of his life when his Symphony No. 1 in C minor (op. 68) was first performed in November 1876. Although the work came late in his career, Brahms already had considerable experience with orchestral writing and symphonic form. The D-minor Piano Concerto (op. 15) had started life as a symphony while the orchestral Serenades (op. 11 and op. 16), at least in terms of form and length, are closely related to the symphony. Brahms had also completed *Eine deutsches Requiem*, the *Schicksalslied*, the *Triumphlied*, and *Rinaldo*. In contrast to Mozart and Bizet with their youthful symphonic experiments, Brahms could hardly be patronized for producing a "commendable effort for one so relatively inexperienced." Instead, Brahms's fate was to be cast as some sort of Greyfriars Bobby of the classical tradition, a feckless Papa Katzenjammer who never lost his old-fashioned accent.

As if making up for lost time, Brahms completed his Symphony No. 2 in D major (op. 73) in 1877, right on the heels of his first symphony. His Symphony No. 3 in F major (op. 90) appeared six years after that, and the Symphony No. 4 in E minor (op. 98) had its first public hearing in October 1885. It was also performed in March 1897 during the last concert Brahms was to hear before his death three weeks later. It was on the occasion of the centenary of his death that the New York Philharmonic recently performed the cycle of Brahms symphonies.[1]

While it is a commonplace that Brahms's music never enjoyed the wide popularity of Tchaikovsky's, let alone the idolatry given to Wagner's, it is less known that until well after the First World War, Brahms was not even much liked. After eviscerating the namesake of *The Case of Wagner*, Friedrich Nietzsche warned that "the last thing I want to do is start a celebration for any *other* musicians"—least of all Brahms. "His is the melancholy of incapacity," Nietzsche wrote. This echoed Hugo Wolf's bitter remark that "the art of composing without ideas has found one of its worthiest representatives in Brahms. Like God Almighty, Brahms understands the trick of making something out of nothing. Enough of this hideous game!" Nor did Brahms fare particularly well in England (though Cambridge attempted to award him an honorary degree), with the likes of George Bernard Shaw calling him a "big baby." Nevertheless, as the

1 The New York Philharmonic presented the symphonies of Brahms, conducted by Kurt Masur, at Avery Fisher Hall, New York, from September 17, 1997, through October 6. Brahms's Symphony No. 1 was performed along with Beethoven's Violin Concerto (Maxim Vengerov, soloist); the Symphonies No. 2 and 3 were performed together; the Symphony No. 4. was performed along with the Symphony No. 3 in D major by Franz Schubert, and Franz Liszt's transcription for piano and orchestra of Schubert's *Wanderer* Fantasy (Boris Berezovsky, soloist).

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twentieth century unfolded, Brahms's reputation began to improve. In 1935, the critic Lawrence Gilman noted the increasing frequency of the Brahms symphonies in concert programs. A decade later Virgil Thomson tepidly commented that Brahms was enjoying a broadly based popularity "but a markedly diminishing attraction for musicians." Today, half a century later, classical music audiences are smaller but Brahms's charms have endured, unlike much of the commentary his music provoked.

Nevertheless, there persists the view that Brahms (especially in contrast to Wagner and Liszt) was a musical reactionary. This view stemmed mostly from Brahms's affection for traditional musical forms such as the sonata and the symphony. H. C. Colles, a British writer, said that Brahms's "appetite for adventure was never large, and as life progressed . . . circumstances forced him increasingly into a position of conservatism." His early biographers agreed. Richard Specht observed that Brahms's music showed how "grandiose" new music could be achieved "within the fast and immovable bounds set by the symphonic form consecrated by Beethoven."

But to suggest that Beethoven had defined the symphony as "fast and immovable" is very odd, particularly in light of the novel structural features of the Ninth Symphony and the Late Quartets. Moreover, Brahms himself introduced several important changes into symphonic structure. Like his predecessors, he demonstrated that the symphony (and, by implication, the sonata) is one of the most pliable dramatic structures invented by man. Far from being a mold into which a composer plugs in themes and develops them according to formula, the symphony is analogous to a play without words, the movements corresponding to individual acts. The unfolding of the music corresponds to, and reflects, something fundamental in human nature, framing emotional contrasts, character development, interplay of personality, and the increase and decrease of tension in every conceivable spiritual register. Brahms exploited the symphonic form as a supple tool of musical art and used it as his primary expressive vehicle. Unlike the Romantic progressives who pioneered new vehicles of expression, Brahms had no need for novelty of form: the symphony was more than adequate to express his prodigious originality.

The New York Philharmonic performed the Brahms symphonies over three evenings, the first of which featured the C-minor Symphony. The performance was a good one, in sharp contrast to an oddly prissy and hesitant performance of the Beethoven Violin Concerto which occupied the first half of the program. Still, the opportunities for comparison were useful, everything said about Beethoven having to cut through rock to achieve his effects seeming to be doubly true for Brahms.

The First Symphony starts with a thirty-seven bar introduction, marked *Un poco sostenuto*, serving to introduce the germs of what become the main themes of the movement. Unlike many interpreters, Mr. Masur took considerable pains with this section, particularly stressing the double-bass eighth notes that give the introduction an attractive weight and substance. The nicely shaped final measures of the movement were particularly satisfying, brilliant yet dying quickly, like sunset at the equator.

The second movement, marked *Andante sostenuto*, is in the remote key of E major. This is music for the stoically heartbroken. As thematically dense as its predecessor, the movement develops from a plaintive four-bar phrase. Mr. Masur's transparency of tone and clarity of structure gently delineated all of these themes and beautifully laid the premise for the concluding violin solo. The third movement, *Un poco allegretto e grazioso*, was taken at a springy pace, accentuating its lyrical personality. On the basis of the "fast and immovable bounds" set by Beethoven, one would normally expect a *scherzo* at this point, but instead Brahms gives us a beguilingly pastoral *intermezzo*. Particularly lovely was the orchestra's reading of the second theme from

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bar 125 to the end. The last movement is loosely structured like the first with a twenty-nine-bar thematic procession, the pizzicato playing of which was excellent. The horn work in the following *Più andante* was crisp and beckoning. At the entrance of the melody leading off the *Allegro non troppo* (the one that prompted the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow to call this symphony "the Tenth" because of its spiritual resemblance to Beethoven's Ninth), audience members nodded in recognition. Brahms clearly knew that he had a great theme here and attempted to handle it without bathos. The composer's ruthless treatment of his material found a willing partner in Mr. Masur, who delighted in not sentimentalizing things.

The all-Brahms second program was something of a letdown. It began stylishly enough with the Symphony No. 3 in F, the work that Virgil Thomson thought the best-constructed of the set. Mr. Masur gave great attention to the subtle harmonies and softer, interlocking structure in which Brahms can be most trenchant and demanding. The second, *Andante* movement showed too little dramatic contrast, while the F-minor last movement was oddly restless, its conclusion being not so much inward and contemplative as self-doubting. The Symphony No. 2 in D major concluded the evening. It, too, was somewhat uneven and distracted. The second movement, despite an unusual, almost polytonal effect, was a bit bloodless as was the pastoral *Allegro grazioso.* The last movement, though livelier, still displayed an unfortunate plodding quality.

The E-minor Fourth Symphony is one of the most affecting works in the symphonic repertoire because of its seamless and concentrated development of tragedy. Its power remains undiluted despite its familiarity. Masur's performance clearly delineated the work's themes and emotional currents, allowing the listener to experience the full effect of Brahms's techniques of emotional saturation. The falling third that opens the work, so much like a child's cry, was eloquently accented by Mr. Masur's lingering on the first note; the long, echoing phrase which that figure introduces was the epitome of resignation. The pizzicato episode beginning around bar 54 and recurring throughout the movement crackled with tension while the pathetic restatement of the theme at the movement's conclusion was somberly colored. The *Andante moderato* opened in cool grays. The lyrical utterance from bar 110 was quite moving with the double-bass passages nudging the listener to an emotional edge.

The high point of the symphony, and perhaps of the entire cycle, was Mr. Masur's splendid rendition of the fourth movement, *Allegro energetico e passionato.* It is rare indeed to conclude a tragic work in theme-and-variation form, and while the prospect may seem dry (or, worse, comically inappropriate), it should be remembered that Brahms was one of the greatest variation writers who ever lived. The thirty variations are derived from a *passacaglia* from Bach's Cantata No. 150 and are used as a kaleidoscope of the darker emotions. Written in the same key, the variations are all brief and, despite their differing tempi and coloration, tumble upon each other. The effect is one of mounting repression and sorrow until, in just a few measures, the miraculous set of modulations in the coda transforms our sense of despondency into one of resigned acceptance. That Brahms created this sensory world from a plain, unadorned eight-note phrase confirms (though perhaps contrarily) the aptness of Hugo Wolf's remark: "Like God Almighty, Brahms understands the trick of making something out of nothing."

Afterword: while the Beethoven Violin Concerto has seen better readings, Maxim Vengerov's own cadenzas were startlingly lush and original. Would that more soloists were as daring! Boris Berezovsky's performance of the Schubert–Liszt *Wanderer* Fantasy featured his own elegant touch and an amusing orchestration, making the work sound like Liszt's hypothetical Piano Concerto No. 2(b).

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Music notes

John Bokina Opera and Politics:
From Monteverdi to Henze.
Yale University Press, 240 pages, $25

Professor Bokina's book is warmly felt, studiously researched, and sedulously written. It is also almost perfectly useless. Anyone who cares enough about opera to buy and read a book about it knows that politics enters into quite a few operas. So do eating, drinking, and hunting. But do we need volumes about them? An amusing and concise essay about any of them could hold its place in an anthology. For whom, however, is such a tome intended? Perhaps for less musically alert fellow political scientists; or, more likely, for oneself, as an attempt to wed one's vocation to one's avocation.

Bokina offers seven deadly earnest chapters starting with "The Prince as Deity, Beast, and Tyrant: Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, *Ulisse*, and *Poppea*," where the title pretty much tells it all. Next, "The Dialectic of Operatic Civilization: Mozart's *Don Giovanni*," about the conflict of aristocratic and bourgeois values, although even Bokina admits that other Mozart operas, by now unfortunately overanalyzed, would have served his purpose better. "Opera and Revolutionary Virtue: Beethoven's *Fidelio*" is a suitable choice, about which Bokina, however, has nothing new to say. "The Utopian Vision of Romantic Anticapitalism: Wagner's *Parsifal*" is far-fetched: the politics of the absence of politics, I suppose.

"The Politics of Psychological Interiorization: Strauss's *Elektra* and Schoenberg's *Erwartung*" is utter nonsense, as Bokina all but admits when he writes that in the former "the story is transformed from a political tale . . . into a Freudian 'family drama,'" and the latter "is . . . an attempt to depict psychic distress through the most advanced musical technique." What has any of this to do with politics unless the term is interpreted so loosely as to become meaningless? "The Aesthetic Politics of the German Artist-Opera: Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, Hindemith's *Mathis*, and Schoenberg's *Moses*" shows Bokina on to a modest something, although in trying to turn *Moses und Aron* into an artist opera, he stretches things beyond reason and to no good purpose.

The long seventh chapter, "Eros and Revolt: Henze's *Bassarids*," addresses an interesting opera at great, flabbily repetitious, length. Its connecting of the work with the New Left is well founded, although the no less relevant homosexuality of the authors—W. H. Auden, Chester Kallman, Hans Werner Henze—goes unexamined. A postscript on "postmodern" operas is too brief to be of value.

Regrettably, all the best points come in quotations from other books, making *Opera and Politics* more a cento than a monograph. Moreover, Verdi, surely the most important politically inspired opera composer of all, is passed over in total silence, a fate this opus may well come to share.

—*John Simon*

Manon, by Jules Massenet, at the
Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

If a theme can be said to mark the first part of the Metropolitan Opera's present season, it must be that of the diva in top form. Denyce Graves's opening-night Carmen got matters off to a good start, yet her well-received performance was to be followed by even more highly praised turns: Deborah Voigt's commanding Ariadne, Jane Eaglen's magnetic Turandot, Cecilia Bartoli's winning Cenerentola, and Renée Fleming's coy, cool, and cruel Manon. Of these, Fleming's outing was particularly interesting, for Jules Massenet's *Manon* features a female lead of startling complexity. It is a role that requires a soprano to coax both sympathy and loathing from an audience, and it has never been an easy part to sing.

Though Auber and Puccini also wrote operas based on the Abbé Prévost's novel *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et Manon Lescaut* (1731), it is Massenet's version that has consistently won audiences's hearts. The

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reasons for this should be clear to anyone who has seen or even heard the work, for Massenet's lively yet elegant score, which is liberally sprinkled with musical homages to the eighteenth century, makes for veritable ear candy. Everything—from the lusty prelude so evocative of provincial France, to the declamatory romantic spasms that mark the work's denouement—beguiles the listener. And in between the young Manon's arrival on the stage and her untimely, disgraceful death come some of the loveliest arias ever written: "Je suis encore tout étourdie," "Voyons, Manon," "Adieu, notre petite table," "En fermant les yeux," "Obéissons quand leur voix appelle," and "Ah! fuyez, douce image." The duets, especially in the opera's second half, are no less rewarding.

Manon tells the story of a young, immature would-be convent girl who becomes enamored of the dashing Chevalier des Grieux. It is the nobleman, however, who is truly smitten at their serendipitous meeting. And when an opportunity to run off together presents itself, Manon and des Grieux seize it. In Paris, where they have fled, they live in poverty, and Manon, who craves life's finer things, has assented to a nefarious plan: she allows des Grieux to be kidnapped by his father in exchange for riches. With des Grieux gone, Manon assumes the life of a courtesan. But at a festival, she overhears des Grieux's father mentioning that his son is about to take holy orders. Overcome with a desire to reunite with des Grieux, she leaves for the chapel of St. Sulpice, where she finds des Grieux and, overcoming his initial reluctance, runs off with him once again. But this time, des Grieux must support Manon in the style to which she has become accustomed. To raise the necessary funds, he takes to gambling, egged on by Manon. He wins handily, but his gaming partner is a sore loser, and des Grieux gets arrested for cheating. His powerful father promises him an early release, but Manon is to be deported. Still in love, des Grieux travels to Le Havre to intercept Manon before she is shipped off to the New World. He succeeds in ransoming her, but her release comes too late, and she dies of exhaustion in des Grieux's arms.

The Met's production, which ran from September 23 through October 18, revived Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's 1987 staging, which hadn't been seen at Lincoln Center since that year. In addition to Fleming, the cast included tenor Marcello Giordani as des Grieux, bass Paul Plishka as his father, and baritone Roberto de Candia as Manon's cousin, Lescaut. But it was Fleming around whom this production revolved. By turns convincingly innocent, desperately ardent, and alarmingly aloof, Fleming, exceptionally poised throughout, proved a joy to watch in this role. She was also a joy to listen to. Her glittering voice tripped easily on the high notes, her singing consistently vivid and expressive. The creamy-voiced Giordani was also impressive. Handsome and graceful, he sang with remarkable freedom. Unfortunately, his thick Italian accent often distracted from the beauty of Henri Meilhac's and Philippe Gille's refined libretto. Yet that hardly mattered when he and Fleming were engaged in their impassioned duets. In the pit, Julius Rudel evinced not just affection for the score, but a clear understanding of its unique aesthetic, and he inspired the Met orchestra to appropriate heights.

Ponnelle's production, on the other hand, didn't seem to possess a very clear vision, vacillating between the simple yet effective and the annoyingly busy. Most of the time, however, it didn't get in the way of Massenet's consistently gripping, often moving, ever-attractive score. It would be a pity to have to wait another ten years to see this opera again, so perhaps the Met will shortly find a way to offer us a new production of this very worthy work. Casting Fleming in the lead would be a good first step.

—David Mermelstein

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The media

The morality of the wasteland

by James Bowman

Of course there were protests. Vice President Al Gore, in a speech to the Hollywood Radio and Television Society, said that when the TV character played by Ellen DeGeneres "came out" as a lesbian, "millions of Americans were forced to look at sexual orientation in a more open light." But the protesting seemed to be against the vice president's having conferred a sort of legitimacy on homosexuality instead of being, as it should have been, against his having conferred a sort of legitimacy on television. What does it matter, after all, what the vice president thinks of homosexuality? Even if he becomes president, he will do what seems politically possible at the time (employment non-discrimination and more AIDS research, probably; gays in the military and gay marriage, probably not). But where moral leadership, at least against the propaganda function of the goggle-box, was desperately needed, Gore stood up and cheered for the other side.

Think about it. To the Hollywood Radio and Television Society, Gore gave his quasi-official imprimatur not only to Ellen and friends but, long after the fact, to Oscar the Grouch and Archie Bunker as the teachers and guides of the American masses. So long as he and others of his persuasion could pretend—as they did when his predecessor, Dan Quayle, attacked "Murphy Brown" in 1992—that TV is just "entertainment," we were at least in theory free to make up our own minds about the great moral issues of the day. But now, in a stunning reversal, Gore has adopted an almost Orwellian view of television as an instrument to bring about social and political change. That the media let the fact pass unremarked upon, in order to show some untelegenic right-wing types frothing at the mouth about gays, suggests that Gore's *volte-face* came as no surprise to them—perhaps even that they share his desire that TV should be consciously trying to remake social attitudes.

Ellen DeGeneres can surely not be alone in taking this view of what she is (now) doing on TV. When she won her Emmy award for comedy writing last September, she said through her tears that she accepted it "on behalf of the people—and the teenagers especially—out there who think there is something wrong with them because they're gay: there's nothing wrong with you, and don't let anyone make you ashamed of who you are." To Hilary DeVries of *TV Guide* she later said:

> I still think in 30 years we'll be dealing with homophobia, and it would be nice to have Ellen on Nick at Nite along with Mary Tyler Moore, someone that [gay] kids could identify with. I have a tendency to diminish what I do for a living, but I also know I'm going to leave here, and I won't be somebody who just had a sitcom but someone who helped change people's minds.

Even this affectation of not knowing that

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"just" sitcoms are all about changing people's minds is a part of the media culture, which will hold on to it in case some future Dan Quayle has the temerity to complain about the fact. The quick-witted Miss DeGeneres surely cannot have failed to notice that every other sitcom in the network lineup these days celebrates the way of life of single young urban professionals who engage in casual sexual relationships with each other; nor can she suppose that just because the lead character on her show is homosexual that this represents a radical departure from what is already TV's moral norm.

Yet being homosexual obviously gives her that particularly prized moral leverage that goes with belonging to an approved class of victims. This she took advantage of in October when ABC added a warning of "adult content" to the show. To *The New York Times*, she complained that this was "blatant discrimination" against her for treating gay subjects. "This advisory is telling kids something's wrong with being gay. . . . It's like if they had a black show . . . and put on a warning that said this show isn't suitable for viewers who don't like black people." Apart from the outrageousness of the last analogy (as if there were no difference, from a child's point of view, between showing a black person and showing two people of any race or sex in sexual situations), it must be admitted she does have a point here. Are representations of promiscuous sex only dangerous to children when they are of gay sex?

In fact, the reverse is probably true, given that most children grow up to be heterosexual. But even apart from the merits of her case, it is clearly useful to her to take good care to keep her victim status up to date. "If you say," she admonished us, "'Don't watch a show that has gay people on it,' who's to say they won't one day say, 'Don't watch a show that has black people on it, or Jews.'" I never wanted to be an activist, but they're turning me into one." Poor thing! Penalized by the obtuse moral views of the majority, she has been dragged not only into being a millionaire TV star but also into politicizing her ostensible entertainments. And, as if that were not enough, she has also felt the sting of vice presidential slobber in being congratulated for having done so. Who could withhold his pity?

But there are some worse off than she! For instance: the fabled Murphy Brown who got breast cancer this season. Moreover, having contracted the most politically correct of illnesses, she then got a liberal "twofer" by taking "medicinal marijuana" to relieve the nausea caused by the chemotherapy. It is ironic that the fictional character of Murphy Brown is supposed to be a political reporter, since her actual engagement with the great issues of the day is shown as the product of her (fictional) personal life. But hers is a show which has to be vetted for authenticity and political correctness. Caryn James in *The New York Times* noted with "relief" that "Murphy Brown does not try to make breast cancer funny, not even as black comedy" and that in the episode "when Corky (Faith Ford) insists that Murphy and Kay get mammograms, that message may reach more women than a dozen other, earnest programs also pegged to Breast Cancer Awareness Month."

Peggy Orenstein, a breast-cancer survivor, was a little more severe in the same paper's Arts & Leisure section. Although the fictional Miss Brown had "used the bully pulpit of her sitcom to offer a rebuttal" to Mr. Quayle as "the lines between reality and fiction" began "to quiver and blur," she had subsequently "capitulated" to the Right by keeping her bastard child out of the series after the show's first few episodes with him. Now, however, Ms. Orenstein sees the producers as once again becoming progressive-minded. She thought the depiction of Murphy's diagnosis so authentic that "I found myself shouting, 'You go, girl!'" This is what, if the producers can keep it up, Ms. Orenstein is disposed to describe as "genuinely daring television," but precisely what its "daring" consists of she is disinclined to say, as she is to be more specific

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about what is the politically correct attitude to cancer.

She does not, for instance, adopt the point of view that was taken up by some of those who appeared at about the same time as Murphy's diagnosis in an HBO special called "Rachel's Daughters: Searching for the Causes of Breast Cancer." There, Dr. Peter Montague, director of something called the Environmental Research Foundation, was quoted as saying that "the major institution that is killing us is the legal entity called corporate America. Anything goes in corporate America. If it gives them breast cancer, too bad—it's their tough luck." But she knew that she didn't have to be as strident (or as loopy) as that. It was enough to make it clear that, in the face of this scourge, mere sympathy for another's misfortune is not only not enough, it is (somehow) an abdication of political responsibility.

Neither does "Ellen" preach too stridently the gospel of sexual liberation, but with gentle ironies suggests that only more or less liberal attitudes—and not, for instance, the right-wing view that homosexual practice is a sin—are held by decent people. The moderate and likable character of Ellen herself takes up a place somewhere to the right of the activist who urges her, for instance, to use the "gay yellow pages" because "this is about getting involved in your community. . . . The man has been keeping our people down long enough. 'Together we stand, divided we fall, queer nation, one and all.'" What? Why, Ellen is just looking for love, like everybody else. A common friend (Patrick Bristow) has to explain to her, when she worries about being pushed to become an activist, that he's sorry that "some of my friends can be a little bit rigid, but that's just their way of finding unity in the face of oppression."

Hmm. Certainly something to think about, isn't it? But the best example of television's "debate"-mongering in this TV season has been in a show that has at times been even more "controversial" than "Ellen" or "Murphy Brown," and that is ABC's new drama series "Nothing Sacred" about a sexy young inner-city priest called "Father Ray" (Kevin Anderson). Two or three deliberately provocative moments to do with abortion and priestly celibacy in the show's first couple of episodes got it a predictable buzz in the press, especially when they elicited a predictable outcry from conservative Catholic organizations. Once again, the stage was set for the triumph of "moderate" Catholics, such as the Paulist priest Ellwood Keiser, who told the *Los Angeles Times* that "I don't think the series is perfect, but I think it's really attempting to invite people into the wrestling match with God. . . . [The conservative Catholic League] certainly doesn't speak for all 60 million American Catholics, and they certainly don't speak for me," he added.

The show's producers can certainly live with that. One of them, David Manson, told *The Washington Post*'s interviewer that

> there's been a split opinion on the show, and I think it reflects the split among Catholics today. Not unlike society itself, there's a range of opinion from conservative to liberal. . . . I know several priests who are not dissimilar from Father Ray. . . . They are extremely engaged, committed people who have created store-front schools in poor communities; they feed the hungry, work with gangs, and run soup kitchens. I think they are heroes in very simple terms. They deserve to be exalted.

Manson may or may not have meant to say that a range of opinion is not unlike society, but he is willing generously to acknowledge that he and his colleagues are "not theologians. We're creating a TV series. So there are large areas we're not cognizant of"—something the attentive viewer will have worked out for himself. Likewise, Mr. Anderson, the star of the show, was quoted in *TV Guide* as saying that "we are not saying this is the way the Catholic Church is everywhere. We are just telling the story about this one particularly radical priest in a city parish. And these things are believable."

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But of course the show's point of view is too obviously sympathetic to this "one particularly radical priest" for it to be what he here tries to suggest it is. Father Ray is carrying Hollywood's banner for the reform of the Catholic Church, and it seems to me to be rather cowardly of him to deny it. Besides, these things are not believable in all kinds of ways—the ways, mainly, in which TV drama in general is not believable. That is to say, it is all carefully set up to reflect a view of the world which is common in certain social circles in New York and parts of California but nowhere else on earth. Anderson sees no irony in his admitting, elsewhere in the interview, that he no longer considers himself a practicing Catholic. "It was a generational thing," he says. Church "didn't relate to what was going on in my life."

Certainly the Church as depicted by his show doesn't relate to many people's lives, if the ratings are anything to go by. "Nothing Sacred" has been throughout its short run consistently at or near the bottom of all shows on all networks in the Nielsen ratings, and a number of its sponsors—including Red Lobster, Weight Watchers, and Sears—abandoned it early on, at the first suggestion of controversy. Yet ABC, in the person of Steve Tao, vice president for drama programming, insists that "we love this show. . . . It is one of the shows we have the most passion for," and they kept it going through the November sweeps.

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of this "passion." Credit, if not much cash, will accrue to ABC and Walt Disney as corporate sponsors of the "debate" within the Catholic Church whose outcome, either way, can scarcely come out badly for them. At the least, it will contribute, as all of television's prime-time lineup does, to the breaking down of moral certainties which might otherwise have interfered with the representations of sexual license which are becoming the whole industry's stock-in-trade. As public discourse in our time has become less hospitable to dogma, more so to "democratic" pretensions, the *bien pensant* has only to suggest that "debate" is appropriate where none existed before to win the case for the critics of the Church.

The emblematic example of abortion may be cited. No one need be "pro-abortion" in order for the case against the Church's clear teaching on the subject to be won; one only needs to be "pro-choice." On the face of it, this is absurd. Are murder and theft and every other sort of sin to be rendered wholesome by pleading a quasi-democratic "right to choose"? But the political tendency of that discussion with which "debate" is often treated as synonymous lends the expression a certain surface plausibility. Moreover, that "debate" is emblematic of the larger "debate" which Kevin Anderson, for example, claims is being stifled by the Church's mere reaffirmation of its historic teaching.

Thus, it is important to understand that "Nothing Sacred" deliberately configures itself as a debate, with the traditionalist "Father Ray" as the spokesman for the Church and the more traditionalist "Father Leo" (Brad Sullivan) standing up for the unambiguous teaching of the Church. Yet when Father Leo takes Father Ray to task, after the latter has advised a young girl (Tamara Mello) trying to decide whether or not to have an abortion to "follow your conscience," it is less for that scandalous teaching than for his hypocrisy in having vented his righteous anger at a slumlord the same day. "You didn't tell him to follow his conscience," says Father Leo, tellingly.

Well, no. But the matter of conscience comes into the one matter no more than it does into the other. The show's real point lies in its tolerance, rather than in the discussion either way of the abortion question. Should we not all be forbearing to those who "follow their conscience"? Yet no serious moralist has ever supposed that doing something to enhance our own convenience and comfort and in defiance of clear moral strictures could by any stretch of the imagination be described as conscientious. Tell me that the fetus is merely an unviable

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tissue mass and that abortion is a non-moral question, but don't insult my intelligence by telling me that it is moral and in keeping with a delicate conscience to abort.

Only the kind of nincompoops (including, apparently, some in holy orders) who write for television would ever propose such a preposterous idea. But everything comes down to fashion for them, as for television in general. When Father Leo reproaches Father Ray with his laxity, Ray replies: "This isn't 1957, Leo. We don't have to live with those consequences. We don't. She does." Actually, of course, she doesn't. A man who believed in the religion he professes would say that she has to live with the consequences (guilt) of aborting, but not with those of having the child (she can give it up for adoption). But the fact that such arguments might have been made in 1957 is in itself conclusive refutation of them, in the view of TV-land.

And in that of such sophisticated critics as Walter Goodman, who wrote in *The New York Times* that "the conservative Catholic Leaguers, who cannot be pleased with changes in the American church in recent decades, might be dreaming of a return to the years when the Catholic Legion of Decency handed down commandments to movie studios." Nous avons changé tout çela. "These days," says Goodman, "any conscientious effort to address religious angst has to take on or at least touch on some real issues," and this means that "it cannot evade abortion, contraception and homosexuality and hope to reach the sort of audience that 'Nothing Sacred' is plainly out to attract."

This is typical of the argument of the media liberal: to take up these issues of abortion, contraception, and homosexuality at all is to take the liberal position on them. Anything else constitutes a purpose to "evade." Thus Father Ray may not be orthodox, but he is "hip," which is the orthodoxy of the dominant faction of media moralists and critics. To be hip you do not have to be as outspoken as Vice President Gore about homosexuality. In fact, you only need to be as outspoken as Bill Clinton, whose speech to a homosexual dinner in Washington in November took place at the same platform where Ellen DeGeneres spoke after the president had left without his supper. Clinton consciously echoed Harry Truman's words when Truman became the first president to address the NAACP in 1947, but Clinton never mentioned "Ellen." He had to think of his "legacy."

And he was lustily cheered by the crowd just for showing up. There were the usual protests (it helped that there was one from ACT UP as well as the usual right-wingers), but one way to look at it is that, instead of Clinton's giving political and moral legitimacy to organized homosexuals, *they* are giving it to *him*. Against the background of the media culture's belief in moral progress as first blacks and then women and now gays achieve such legitimacy, it is only possible to be on the side of progress or reaction. The press, like the gays themselves, are now disposed to give Clinton credit for being on the side of progress and civil rights, and isn't that enough of a legacy for any president?

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Fiction chronicle

Violating the cardinal rules

by Brooke Allen

No one has ever been able to come up with a good definition of "postmodernism," though plenty of ink and hot air has been expended in the attempt. Fredric Jameson, writing back in 1983, tried and failed; Ihab Hassan, four years later, finally gave up and made do with vague descriptive terms like "indeterminacies" and "immanences." The best anyone seems to be able to do is to compile lists of attributes or tendencies: postmodernism is not unified, after all; it is not so much a movement as a state of mind.

The editors of the new *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*[1] have fared no better than Hassan and Jameson in their attempt to define postmodernism, finally deciding simply to run through various properties that can generally be agreed upon as being postmodern. "In the arts," they write in their introduction, "postmodern traits include pastiche, the incorporation of different textual genres and contradictory 'voices' within a single work; fragmented or 'open' forms that give the audience the power to assemble the work and determine its meaning; and the adoption of a playful irony as a stance that seems to prove itself endlessly useful." In philosophy, postmodernism is concerned with "the problematic relationship between the real and the unreal; the constructedness of meaning, truth, and history; and the complexities of subjectivity and identity. All of these are marked by a thoroughgoing skepticism toward the foundations and structures of knowledge."

As we now know after enduring some thirty years of postmodern attitude, all that relentlessly playful irony, all those contradictory voices, all that open form and thoroughgoing skepticism can make for some pretty heavy going. One doesn't pick up a postmodern novel simply to while away an idle hour; one must expect to be instructed, if not delighted, in the most strenuous manner.

I had never attempted to formulate my own definition of postmodernism, but while going over the table of contents of the new anthology, I found myself surprised at some of the selections. Joseph Heller, Bobbie Ann Mason, Philip Roth, Marilynne Robinson, and Maxine Hong Kingston: these writers didn't really strike me as postmodern. Why not? Because, I realized, they are so very readable. So it would seem that unreadableness, a certain willful resistance on the part of the author to the reader's pleasure or ease, is a central part of the postmodern project. By this standard, authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, John Barth, and Salman Rushdie (the last-named is not American, so not included in this volume, thankfully) are more genuinely "postmodern" than the writers listed above.

But doesn't this contradict the general

1 *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, edited by Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy; Norton, 672 pages, $24.95 paper.

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agreement that postmodern literature is playful (or "ludic," to use pomo jargon), concerned with delectation and aesthetic pleasure? Not necessarily; someone is deriving pleasure, but who? The author, certainly: the pleasure, at the very least, of displaying his own stunning inventiveness and erudition. Whether the reader derives quite so much pleasure is less certain, though it is true that some readers take great satisfaction in the simple fact of being able to read such clever books, in matching their wits, in short, with the author's.

A case in point is William S. Burroughs, whom the Norton editors describe as "a crossroads figure in the passage of American fiction from the modern to the postmodern." Burroughs objected to "traditional" linear narrative on the grounds that it is authoritarian, by which he meant, apparently, that it dictates to the reader how to think. The excerpt from his *Nova Express* included in this anthology presents Burroughs's alternative to linearity, the liberal use of collage, cut-ups, and other techniques common to both modern and postmodern art.

I don't know why this style should be considered any less "linear" than the traditional style of, say, Henry James; the narrative still follows a distinct line, after all, and it is a line very much dictated by the author. Perhaps a more accurate term than "nonlinear" would be "nonchronological." Nor do I see why Burroughs's style is less "authoritarian" than that of a writer like James. The reader still peruses the author's text; the fact that the author has mixed up tenses and subjects might have liberated the author, but how can it be said to liberate the reader from the author's intentions and directions? If *The Portrait of a Lady* is authoritarian, then *Nova Express* is literary terrorism. Ludic it may be, but pleasurable it's not.

In his famous postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco attempts to explain the attitude which the Norton anthologists describe as "playful irony," a stance that has been used relentlessly by up-to-date postmodern authors:

> The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited; but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but loves her in an age of lost innocence.

This sort of irony is perfectly useful as one mood among many, but used indiscriminately across an entire *oeuvre*, as it has been by writers such as Pynchon, Barth, Rushdie, and Martin Amis, it kills all true and spontaneous emotion. The genuine is lost forever behind the ironic reflection; the reader thinks, but no longer feels.

A curious feature of this postmodern irony is that it seems to be essentially unconnected with humor. A few authors—Eco and Pynchon, among others—are on occasion able to combine irony and humor, but for the most part postmodern literature, which is practically defined by irony, is not really funny; the *Norton Anthology*, in this respect a mirror of the literature it seeks to represent, abounds in the egregiously unfunny. What else can one expect of a collection that by definition must include gender theorists, postcolonialists, rewriters of "history from below," gay and lesbian literary theory, and postmodern conceptions of the "subject"? Not a lot of yucks here; the tenor of the collection as a whole is horribly earnest.

There is Carole Maso, for instance, recipient of a lucrative Lannan Literary Fellowship. "To my mind," Maso is quoted in this volume as saying, "books are human

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documents, which means they should have 'fingerprints' on them, evidence that a mess went into creating them—that you were alive and breathing, or in love, or having your period while the thing was being made." What is there to be said except that quite a lot of readers, myself included, would just as soon be left in blissful ignorance about whether or not an author is having her period? At any rate, the excerpt that follows this remark, from *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*, is innocent of either irony or humor; it reads something like the high-camp avant-garde of *Last Year at Marienbad*, or, more exactly, like a Nichols and May take-off of it. "In the savage and beautiful afternoon we tried to speak. You said: 'Where do you live?' I said: 'New York.' It was a time when I was still hoping you might save me."

Then there is Lynne Tillman, author of *Living with Contradictions*. "I must wrest this language and its forms away from or out of 'the majority' (of which I am a part, in some ways and at some times, to others), to unman it, to un-American it, even to unwhite it, to inconvenience the majority language, to unconventionalize it, even to shame it, in an odd sort of way, to question privilege, my own, too, of course." The results fall somewhat short of her ambitions, if the excerpt in the anthology is anything to go by. Here is a representative paragraph, sounding vaguely like a parody of Hiawatha: "New cars, new lovers. Sometimes she felt like Ma Kettle in a situation comedy, looked on from the outside. You're either on the inside looking out or the outside looking in. (Then there's the inside looking in, the outside looking out)."

Also here is Paul Auster, a self-important solipsist who, in *City of Glass*, churns out a handful of intellectual clichés that were far more elegantly and subtly conveyed in the Chandler and Hammett novels whose conventions Auster appropriates. His private eye Quinn (who also goes by the name Paul Auster: postmodern irony, of course) muses that "the detective is one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable."

Worst of all are the authors for whom the primary impetus of their art is their own "otherness." Chicana, lesbian, Native American, whatever: the common stance of the authors within this sub-genre of postmodernism is an opposition to something they conceive as "Western culture," though what they mean by "Western" is not always very clear. Gloria Anzaldua, with her vision of a political coalition of "Third World women, lesbians, feminists, and feminist-oriented men of all colors" lays out the standard assumptions in her *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*:

> In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life [as Western culture has, she implies]. . . . My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). . . . By taking up curanderismo, Santeria, shamanism, Taoism, Zen and otherwise delving into the spiritual life and ceremonies of multi-colored people, Anglos would perhaps lose the white sterility they have in their kitchens, bathrooms, hospitals, mortuaries and missile bases.

What sort of cloud-cuckooland is this? Does she seriously imagine Bill Clinton or Boris Yeltsin or Jacques Chirac taking up shamanism, delving into the spiritual life of multi-colored people, and disassembling their own missile bases? And what's so wrong with sterile white hospitals, anyway? For the Norton editors to include this sort of baloney in what is supposed to be a serious text cheapens the entire venture.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, author of *Woman, Native, Other*, provides another example of the

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outrageously jejune. "Let me tell you a story," her excerpt begins.

> For all I have is a story. Story passed on from generation to generation, named Joy. Told for the joy it gives the storyteller and the listener. Joy inherent in the process of storytelling. Whoever understands it also understands that a story, as distressing as it can be in its joy, never takes anything away from anybody. Its name, remember, is Joy. Its double, Woe Morrow Show.

Well . . . there must be people in the world who like this sort of thing; but a *Norton Anthology* should not pander to them.

Even the more respectable purveyors of racial and sexual otherness included by the anthologizers are uninspiring. bell hooks (yes, it's really spelled that way) of Yale University, the author of several books on race and feminism, starts well but quickly provokes mind-numbing boredom in her essay "Postmodern Blackness": "This hopelessness creates longing for insight and strategies for change that can renew spirits and reconstruct grounds for collective black liberation struggle. . . . Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy."

Et cetera, indeed. hooks is an enthusiastic postmodernist, taking issue with Cornel West's contention that the arcane language and conventions of postmodernism are Eurocentric and further isolate black intellectuals from the rest of the black community. If hooks's own rhetoric is anything to go by, he would seem to have a very viable point.

The postmodern *Norton Anthology*, like the era it covers, is awash in mediocrity, but there are quite a few strong entries, too. Helena Maria Viramontes's "Cariboo Cafe," Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* are all worth rereading. So is Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," which the editors place within a postmodern category they define as "Kmart realism" but which seems to me about as classic an American short story as you can find, firmly within the Sherwood Anderson tradition. It is no new thing, after all, for artists to write about the working class, and the fact that that class now drives trucks and shops at Kmart rather than toiling in coal mines does not, or ought not to, change the essence of the genre too radically. To see only vulgarity in the pleasures of the uneducated is to expose a sad poverty of imagination: as Mason points out, "what's on TV and what songs are on and what's on sale at the local store and what movies are playing" are important to her characters, but then, "these kinds of things at one level or another are important to just about everybody." This is substantially true, and the many postmodern authors who specialize in making condescendingly ironic reflections on popular culture should take note.

As a collection, *Postmodern American Fiction* is too much of a grabbag; the editors have tried to include too many authors, and as a result the selections are so short that the flavor of many of the entries is never given a chance to come through. It seems practically pointless for the editors to have included excerpts from *In Cold Blood*, *Catch-22*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, or Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*, valuable as these works are in their own right, for each of them takes time to construct their own significance and aura; any selection of less than thirty pages or so might just as well not be included. On the other hand, some of the authors in the anthology improve drastically from having their logorrheic outpourings restricted to just a few pages. David Foster Wallace and Thomas Pynchon for instance, who tend to destroy their own creations through obsessive repetition, elaboration, and digression, prove in excerpts from *The Girl with Curious Hair* and *The Crying of Lot 49* respectively to be practically as clever and witty as they think they are.

The editors of this anthology would have done better to be a little more exclusive in their choice of works, and a little more

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generous with the space they allotted their chosen authors. They certainly might have spared their readers the mindless dreck, sure to be outdated within the next year or two, by no-talents such as Carole Maso, Jayne Ann Phillips, Donna Haraway, and Samuel R. Delany, author of a thoroughly unreadable medieval allegory-fantasy. They should also have omitted the J. Yellowlees Douglas and Michael Joyce hypertexts which, whatever value they might have had on the computer screen, are flatter than pancakes on the printed page.

The problem is that we are still in the thick of the postmodern era, and the editors of the *Norton Anthology* have not gained enough distance on it to judge which authors, and which works, are really worth anthologizing. Which of the excerpts in this collection will still be considered important, say, thirty years from now? It is likely, depressing though the thought may be, that the authors that will still be thought the "classics" of early postmodernism will be the same old windbags, Barthelme, Gass, Coover, and Barth. Roth, Heller, Capote, and Toni Morrison stand up far better, but although they are included here I don't really see them as "postmodern" authors, any more than their contemporaries (who are not included in this collection) Updike, Styron, Cheever, or Malamud. Among the younger authors represented, it seems that, whatever their manifest faults, Pynchon, DeLillo, Coupland, David Foster Wallace, and the gifted but self-important William T. Vollman might still be read. Other good writers included here, like Maxine Hong Kingston and Marilynne Robinson, will also stand up, but again they don't seem terribly postmodern.

The majority of the authors included in this collection, however, will not be able to compete in the longevity race with those listed above; they have highly inflated reputations that will not stand the test of more than a few years. The works of writers like Kathy Acker, Paul Auster, and Leslie Marmon Silko are manifestations of intellectual fashion rather than works of art in their own right. Joyce Carol Oates, Rosario Ferré, and others are somewhat better, but not really strong enough to last beyond their own time; certainly the works included here will not.

The editors of the *Norton Anthology* have probably set themselves too difficult a task in trying to assemble a definitive anthology of a period which is still underway. Looking back at the Victorian or even the modern period, it is easy enough to judge which works of fiction or poetry have stood up, and which have fallen by the wayside: but we have no such distance on the postmodern era; even the wisest critics would be hard put to make solid judgments, and these editors are not the wisest, not by any means. Their choices violate again and again the only two cardinal rules of art: that it not be pretentious, and that it not be boring. It is sad to say that if this anthology indicates any essential truth about ourselves and our era, it is simply that we live in very dull times.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *Life Sentences: Literary Essays*, by Joseph Epstein (Norton, $25), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Books

Blasts from the past

by James Wolcott

No American novelist writes crowd scenes like Don DeLillo; no one else even tries. Other writers may juggle large casts of characters, but DeLillo is the only one who papers his backgrounds with thousands of extras, as if he were shooting the teeming masses—democracy in the raw—through a wide-angle lens. He possesses an imperial directorial eye on the page, a David Lean-like power to choreograph chaos into the rough pageantry of history-in-the-making. For DeLillo, there's no such thing as mindless spectacle. His human circuses, which he monitors from his control booth, powerfully, complexly signify. The major event in DeLillo's novel *White Noise* was a major evacuation from "an airborne toxic event," a white cloud that acquired the doomy, symbolic charisma of Moby Dick. (It was also a prophetic preview of the environmental "haze" that has smothered Southeast Asia for much of this year.) DeLillo is fascinated as well by the semiotics of billboards, neon signs, and corporate logos, which he has dubbed the international Esperanto of jet-lag. Fittingly, much of the mob action in his fiction is set in stadia or sports arenas (there being few logos more universal than the Nike "swoosh"). His novel *End Zone* treated football as absurdist farce; under a pseudonym, he reportedly wrote a racy potboiler about a women's hockey team called *Amazons*; and *Mao II* opened with a mass wedding of Moonies at Shea Stadium in which the couples seemed to descend from the mothership. His latest and most immense novel, *Underworld*, also begins in a ballpark—the old Polo Grounds, which DeLillo leaves as wreathed with noble vapors as a Confederate battlefield.[1]

Originally published in *Harper's*, the opening chapter of *Underworld* recreates the most famous single moment in baseball history: Bobby Thomson's pennant-winning home run off of Ralph Branca in the 1951 series between the Giants and the Dodgers—"the shot heard round the world." Using the metafictional devices of E. L. Doctorow in *Ragtime*, DeLillo mingles fact and legend, intercutting the bullfrog posturing of big shots like Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, and J. Edgar Hoover (all actually in the ballpark that afternoon) with the darting of smaller fry. DeLillo not only evokes the smells and atmosphere of the Polo Grounds—the crisp fabric of the air—but makes a visit to the men's room carry the ritualistic echo of the Roman baths:

> Men passing in and out of the toilets, men zipping their flies as they turn from the trough and other men approaching the long receptacle, thinking where they want to stand and next to whom and not next to whom, and the old ballpark's reek and mold are consolidated here, generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes and peanut shells and disinfectants

1 *Underworld*, by Don DeLillo; Scribner, 827 pages, $27.50.

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> and pisses in the untold millions, and they are thinking in the ordinary way that helps a person glide through a life, thinking thoughts unconnected to events, the dusty hum of who you are. . . .

The day's festivities fall under a pall. As Hoover in the VIP box tries to be a regular guy around Sinatra and Gleason, he gets word that the Soviets have detonated an atomic bomb within their own borders, "a red bomb that spouts a great white cloud like some thunder god of ancient Eurasia." Amid cheering fans, he alone hears the rumble of the arms race to come. The arc of Thomson's home run mimics the flight of a missile, the blizzard of shredded paper that falls from the stands imitating the ash of radioactive fallout. (Into Hoover's lap falls a magazine reproduction of Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death*, with its hellscape of fire and flayed flesh.) Like *Mao II*, *Underworld* doesn't build to a climax; it builds *from* a climax, tracing the seismic ripples generated from its tremendous opening. In the outfield, the ball Thomson hit is recovered by a kid named Cotter Martin, who scoots home with his prize. The baseball, which will change hands over the years and become a coveted jewel of Americana, is what Hitchcock called the "MacGuffin"—the pretext to set the plot into motion.

But what plot? Shuttling back and forth in time, *Underworld* straddles the transition from the industrial age to the information age (the last chapter is set in cyberspace). Hopping back and forth in space, *Underworld* switches from the money temples of the metropolis to the barren sweeps of the Southwest desert. Patterns appear. The number thirteen, for example. (Ralph Branca's jersey number was thirteen.) The bull's-eye logo for Lucky Strike cigarettes. Familiar motifs surface. As in previous DeLillo novels, *Underworld* flickers with forbidden footage which seems to have been processed in the collective-unconscious darkroom of America. Pot parties are held in an artist's studio as a bootleg of the Zapruder film is shown on a bank of TVs, President Kennedy's head exploding again and again in a "terrible mist of tissue and skull." A videotape of a Texas serial killer claiming a victim is replayed on the news until it acquires the hypnotic minimalism of pornography and makes normal life look dolled-up. "The things around you have a rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look. The tape is superreal, or maybe underreal is the way you want to put it. It is what lies at the scraped bottom of all the layers you have added." One section of the novel is called "Cocksucker Blues," a title taken from Robert Frank's long-suppressed documentary of the Rolling Stones on tour. *Underworld* itself derives its name from a supposedly "lost" film by Sergei Eisenstein called *Unterwelt*, which is screened at Radio City Music Hall for thousands of cinephiles (a Susan Sontag dream date), who find themselves bombarded with creaky pictorials of zappy destruction—sci-fi Brueghel.

The herky-jerkiness of DeLillo's narrative is intended to convey the schizoid jitters of the atomic age. By day, we pursue the American dream; by night, we prepare for Armageddon. Both eat up resources (more gadgets, more guns), and leave behind mountains of debris. The novel's lead mouthpiece, Nick Shay, is a waste specialist who harbors deep thoughts and forebodings on the significance of the ever-mounting dump piles that are the end result of runaway consumption. Whether it's consumer packaging or hazardous waste, mankind is fooling itself in thinking it has its byproducts under control. We are at the mercy of the materiality of the world. We're up to our glazed eyeballs in useless junk.

Thematically, DeLillo has his ducks in a row. (He always does.) Like Norman Mailer in *Harlot's Ghost*, DeLillo is composing a psychological symphony of Cold War worry, a secret history of betrayal, paranoia, espionage, and military escalation smoothed over by official lies and *Reader's Digest* pieties. We American dupes brush our teeth a shiny white as our individuality rots at the root in the death ray of TV. Interestingly,

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both novels resurrect the standup comic Lenny Bruce to play the imp of the perverse, whose sick jokes and cackling laugh cut like Zorro through the cardigan sweaters of *Father Knows Best* family values. Comparing Mailer's Lenny Bruce to DeLillo's—well, it's no contest. The scene in *Harlot's Ghost* where Lenny Bruce scandalizes the ruling-class wasps with his jabbering tongue (get your coat, Mildred, we're going) is so stiff and stagy it belongs on the History Channel. Mailer is unable to convey Bruce's pimpy swagger as a performer. DeLillo's Lenny Bruce is a true charismatic, a pasty golem who seems to possess an independent existence and a cold skin. In the spirit of Albert Goldman's pop biography *Ladies and Gentleman, Lenny Bruce!*, DeLillo seems to be channeling Bruce from some hip room in the hereafter: "Lenny was a handsome guy with dark hair and hooded eyes and he resembled a poolshark who'd graduated to deeper and sleazier schemes. His brows were set at a cosmopolitan arch that seemed to function as an open challenge to his hustler aspect—if you're dumb enough to believe my scam, that's *your* problem, schmucko."

When Lenny Bruce makes his first appearance in *Underworld*, it's at a night club in West Hollywood during the hairiest period of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962:

> The seating at the Troubadour consisted mainly of folding chairs and when enough people laughed there was a wheezy groan from the slats and hinges. And the audience sat there thinking, How real can the crisis be if we're sitting in a club on Santa Monica Boulevard going ha ha ha.
>
> *"We're all gonna die!"*
>
> Lenny loves the postexistential bent of this line. In his giddy shriek the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin. His closest followers laugh the loudest. Their fan-fed vanity is gratified. They're included in Lenny's own incineration. All the Lennies. The persecuted junkie. The antihypocrite. The satirist and nose picker. Lenny the hipster fink. Lenny the ass mechanic, girl-spotting in hotel lobbies. Lenny the vengeance of the Lord.

Heard in a club in San Francisco a week later, the audience full of aging dharma bums, the same material seems to land off to the side. The beats in the audience are ahead of Bruce when it comes to thinking the unthinkable:

> The beats didn't need a missile crisis to make them think about the bomb. The bomb was their handiest reference to the moral squalor of America, the guilty place of smokestacks and robot corporations, Time-magazined and J. Edgar Hoovered, where people sat hunched over cups of coffee in a thousand rainswept truckstops on a jazz prairie, secret Trotskyites and sad nymphomaniacs with Buddhist pussies—things Lenny made fun of. Lenny was showbiz, he was suited and groomed and cool and corrupt, the mortician-comic. . . .

It's a nifty piece of pop criticism that DeLillo delivers, a personality analysis of the audience that sums up an entire social wave, the evocation of "rainswept truckstops on a jazz prairie," a snapshot marriage of Jack Kerouac and Robert Frank (Kerouac having written the foreword to Frank's *The Americans*). The Lenny Bruce sections showcase how attuned DeLillo is to the nervous system of every subculture he enters in *Underworld*, from swingers playing musical beds at a hotel to waste specialists talking shop. It's a legacy from the New Journalism, this Silly Putty ability to shape-shift and imitate anyone at will. Some of the best scenes in *Underworld* are like day-glo passages from Tom Wolfe played on a black-and-white TV: social observation decolorized into a grainy monochrome of nostalgia. ("It is all falling indelibly into the past," is how DeLillo describes the dying glory of that day at the Polo Grounds.) Where Wolfe is exhilarated by the coltish energies of capitalism, the giddy froth and reckless abandon, DeLillo (a less fun guy) is drawn to the dark, glacial

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agents of change—the submerged megatrends. Wolfe puts on fashion shows, DeLillo takes institutional readings. He can look at a glass tower and perceive that although it's hooked to the world through faxes and modems, it inevitably becomes a citadel unto itself: "The corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves. We design these organized bodies to respond to the market, face foursquare into the world. But things tend to drift dimly inward."

For all its scanning of the horizon, *Underworld* also abdicates interest in what's out there and begins to collect inward. A technocrat of literature, a didact despite his lab-goggle detachment, DeLillo seems to be making an instructional series on the many faces of anomie in *Underworld*; his own thoughts are free to circulate, but his characters seem stuck in whatever national mood is prevailing at the moment, like lost souls to flypaper. DeLillo applies such torturing attention to detail that, like other clinical overlords (the director Stanley Kubrick comes to mind), he sometimes loses sight of the overall design; perfectionism becomes a way of blocking out other, larger, more organic problems. The result is a finely calibrated morass, a jumble of big set-pieces. One of the mantras of *Underworld* is "Everything connects" (e.g., " 'What do we know?' Sims said. 'That everything's connected,' Jesse said"), which turns out to be wishful thinking. A lot of elaborate foreplay comes to naught.

Ominous import, for instance, is accorded the private life and public mystique of the Texas Highway Killer, only to have him drop out of sight and rate a memory-jogging mention hundreds of pages later ("No one talks about the Texas Highway Killer anymore"). DeLillo's re-creation of Truman Capote's Black and White Ball in 1966, in which J. Edgar Hoover and his longtime sidekick Clyde Tolson function as a queeny Tweedledum and Tweedledee, is an imaginary portion of inside dish, a bitchy caricature that reads like Gore Vidal by way of Cindy Adams. A scene in a condom shop seems to be included only so DeLillo could do a virtuoso riff on the varieties of latex on display, ditto a similar routine on the distinctive properties of Jell-O. A religious miracle in which the image of a slain girl rises above a lake is a piece of magic realism that bears no relation to the rest of the book. I could cite other examples, but we'd be here all day. DeLillo's novels have flubbed their plot expectations before—*Running Dog* succumbed to mystification; *The Names* was a complicated geopolitical thriller which couldn't solve its own puzzle, and punted—but never this protractedly. The novel is so determined to be great, it can't get out of its own way.

Underworld goes beyond the intellectual sovereignty of a godlike author, indulging in ponderous self-reflexive gamesmanship that seems like a fusion of man and computer. He seems to be parodying himself with his H.A.L.-like monotone on earthling behavior, as in a deadpan paragraph on the mystery of how people and baggage disperse so quickly from airports ("people with their separate and unique belongings, the microhistory of toilet articles and intimate garments"). Other times, it's as if DeLillo can't pull himself away from the pinball machine: he repeats himself as if ringing up a score. Time and again his Nick Shay recites his recycling ritual—"We do tin versus aluminum," cans versus bottles, paper versus plastic; on and on like a rosary. Another character fixes himself a sandwich as if he were an alienated worker on the assembly line: "He spread the mayonnaise. He spread mayonnaise on the bread. Then he slapped the lunch meat down. He never spread the mayonnaise on the meat. He spread it on the bread. Then he slapped down the meat and watched the mayo seep around the edges." Equally formalized and mechanical are some of the long exchanges of male dialogue, which have the budda-bing-budda-boom head bob of David Mamet or Martin Scorsese characters trying to punch their way out of a paper bag:

> Muzz looked into the side mirror.

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"You hit my bumpah you fuck."

The guy said something.

"You trying to do?" Muzz said.

The guy spoke into his windshield.

"Tell him," Nick said, "Where'd you get your license?"

Muzz put his head out the window but did not turn toward the car behind them.

"Where'd you get your license to drive that piece of shit?"

The guy said something into the windshield.

"Tell him Sears Roebuck or what?" Nick said.

Muzz looked into the mirror, his face an inch from the glass.

"Sears Roebuck you fuck?"

The light changed and people began to blow their horns.

That's the last we see of Muzz, who has a manhole to crawl into somewhere.

Nick Shay is obviously DeLillo's alter ego in the book—he does the most wisecracking when young, the most soul-searching when middle-aged, has the most mama-mia sex—and the startling aspect of *Underworld* is how much of a classic *Bildungsroman* it becomes after Bobby Thomson's homer clears the wall. The epigrammatic brooding on waste, the Bomb, airport lobbies, and serial murder is really a thick smog cover for this portrait of the artist as a young punk. However far it roams, it ends up nosing around the old neighborhood. Born in 1936, DeLillo was raised in the Bronx, which is for him what Chicago was for James T. Farrell and Nelson Algren—the raw goods. Gritty, aggressive, even its name—Bronx—sounds like a brick hitting you on the head. Other cities seem painterly, the Bronx is pure photojournalism. Or as a nun in *Underworld* harangues a busload of tourists: "Brussels is surreal. Milan is surreal. This is real. The Bronx is real."

T. S. Eliot said mankind cannot bear too much reality, and I must be unable to bear too much Bronx, because somewhere in the middle of DeLillo's boyhood flashbacks I was out of my mind with boredom, trapped in a naturalistic rut of reading about dim bulbs making their nightly rounds:

> There were a thousand sameshit nights when he played knock rummy with a guy named Fontana in Fontana's father's plumbing supply store, a nominal nickel a point, or shot a game of pool and had a slice of pizza at Half Moon with JuJu and Patsy, nights that always ended down, disappointed someway, and once he phoned Loretta from the candy store and told her he had his dick in his hand and studied the pause at the other end, knowing she was in the room with her mother, her brothers, her grandfather and who knows who else, and he went downstairs sometimes and stood smoking alone, late, in the doorway of Donato's grocery, spitting occasional grains of tobacco into the wind.

Running it all together into one lyric laundry list doesn't make it less of a knucklehead routine. What's never developed in *Underworld* is how young Nick, a crude-talking toughie who is sent upstate for killing a man (an existential *acte gratuit*), eventually matures into the Schopenhauer of modern waste disposal. He must have been suppressing a lot of inner life between fist fights.

So unwieldy and disjointed is *Underworld* that DeLillo has to manufacture an epiphany at the end—an ascension into cyberspace, the afterlife perceived as a murky hyperlink of everything ever written—to position some of the themes and characters into some sort of harmonic convergence. He uses rhetoric to wrap everything in a bow. "A word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream," DeLillo announces, seated before a computer screen. His language lifts, he drops his customary cool, and his penultimate paragraph becomes a prose-poem which achieves a strained eloquence due more to its church-organ sonority than to its actual content. What is this word that "carries the sunlit ardor of an object deep in drenching noon, the argument of binding touch"? Like Eliot offering benediction at the end of *The Waste Land*, DeLillo blesses

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his toxic wasteland with a simple word: "Peace." It is more than a sacred note, it is a cosmic chord. The word gets a paragraph all to itself in the book.

Underworld's final reverberation can't rescue the novel from entropic rundown, although it's understandable why its humble grandeur would leave most reviewers suitably wowed. Many of them wanted desperately to be wowed, having waited so long in the front lines of DeLillo fandom for mainstream readers to play catch-up. For decades DeLillo has accrued a rising dividend of goodwill for doing audacious imaginative, solid-integrity work (no slick-magazine slumming for him), and has benefited from the perception that although his books have been praised and awarded, he's never really had the commercial breakthrough he deserved. *White Noise* did well, but it wasn't whopping, like, say, *Gravity's Rainbow*. Even *Libra*, DeLillo's novel about Lee Harvey Oswald that many considered his most accessible, proved to be too literary for conspiracy buffs. A lot of money and promotional effort went into boosting *Underworld* onto the bestseller list. His publisher reportedly paid $1.3 million for English-language rights, and screen rights were sold for almost another million more. Vital to this marketing campaign was the participation of the famously reclusive and elusive DeLillo himself, a proud loner who was coaxed out of the phantom zone for this book to give readings, grant rare interviews, and have his grim picture taken. "A critic of consumerism gets the hard sell," was the ironic subtitle *Publisher's Weekly* gave to its article on the packaging of DeLillo. Of course, promotional muscle and a supine, panting press aren't enough to put over a book—otherwise unsold copies of Robert Hughes's widely hoopla'd *American Visions* wouldn't be stacked into little forts in some bookstores.

No, the clue to the book's commercial and critical success is embedded in its opening sentence. "He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful." The key word is "American." *Underworld* addresses our fascination with ourselves, our collective self-preoccupation; it's an American novel on American subjects for the American century that will soon stagger into the American millennium. The minimalism of Seventies and early Eighties fiction has been vanquished by this heavy-duty maximalism. Like Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, *Underworld* undertakes a master surveyor's summing-up of America as idea and ideal, an investigation of what makes America so unique and Faustian on the world stage. Because the country is so crowded, antic, and spacious, the books are crowded, antic, and spacious. (As if to out-do everyone, William T. Vollmann is said to be working on a novel so voluminous that it can't find a publisher.) *Underworld* not only feeds this need for a guidebook to the tainted soul of America but, unlike the others, conveys a mood—a bluesy air of melancholy that reflects the battle fatigue left by a half-century of assassinations, nuclear buildup, and media barrage. The diagnosis of *Underworld* is that white, middle-aged, middle-class America is in the dumps literally and emotionally. The Soviet Union is flat on its back, but we're dead on our feet. It's a message that resonates with those who have experienced malaise ever since the Age of Aquarius went bust. "*Underworld* ends with a transcendent and redemptive act of grace," veteran lefty and unreconstructed bleeding-hearter John Leonard writes in *The Nation*, adding, "While this astonishing novel may have earned it, America certainly hasn't." To the literary establishment, *Underworld* is the valedictory, the monumental tombstone, America deserves. But the best parts of the novel aren't when DeLillo is courting the blues, but when he has Bobby Thomson at bat or Lenny Bruce on stage, and the writing turns jazzy. He's like a teacher who departs from his lesson plan or a priest who strays from his sermon, and decides to wing it. His words fly. Then destiny calls, and it's back to the doldrums.

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Substitutes for truth

Barbara Herrnstein Smith Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy.
Harvard University Press,
224 pages, $37.50; $17.95 paper

reviewed by Jenny Teichman

This short book contains a preface, eight essays, and fifty-nine pages of notes. Earlier versions of the preface and some of the essays have already been published elsewhere. The topic is the "contemporary intellectual controversy" between those who uphold a theory dubbed traditional or classical objectivism and those described variously as progressives, relativists, deconstructionists, constructivists, or postmodernists. (In order to save space I will usually call this group relativists or postmodernists).

Objectivism affirms the possibility of truth, reason, and knowledge in philosophy, science, and history. Postmodernism denies, in one way or another, either the existence or the possibility of truth, reason, and knowledge. The author, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, sides with the postmodernists, mainly, I think, because she believes they are in the swim; thus she states that those who support postmodernism include "prize-winning theoretical biologists, esteemed neurophysiologists, accomplished computer engineers, and established historians and philosophers of science," as well as the dozens of American academics referred to in her notes.

In the first chapter, "The Unquiet Judge," Smith tries to rebut the accusation that relativist views on truth etc. entail political and social quietism. Her arguments are as follows. First she equates quietism with positivist support of the status quo (a move borrowed, perhaps unconsciously, from Marxism, which interestingly enough employs the expression *objective* support in this context); then she points out that objectivists (not a misprint) can be right-wing as well as left-wing; and then she bluntly asserts that objectivism is "empty and obscurantist." These propositions cannot show that relativism does not entail quietism.

Two further themes appear (and reappear in later chapters). One is the thesis that differences of opinion should never be seen in terms of the true/false dichotomy but always as products of personal histories. However, an opinion's having an origin is not incompatible with its having a truth-value. Smith is scornful of what she calls the traditional or "logicist" true/false dichotomy but doesn't mind introducing fake dichotomies like that between opinions as truth-bearers and opinions as products. The second thesis is that relativists can and do engage in arguments about political and social questions. I will say more about this later.

In Chapter 2, "Making (Up) the Truth," Smith sets out to defend constructivism, the view that truth, knowledge, and reason are creations of human minds and differ from mind to mind. Her defense lies in bluntly asserting that "contemporary reconceptions of classic ideas of truth and knowledge . . . effectively challenge the authority of traditional explanations." Unfortunately, the content of the challenge remains unstated. Smith herself does not say what the challenge consists of, and on page 23 she writes, "I shall not attempt to describe here the work of individual constructivists nor will I be discussing in any detail their characteristic investigations, analyses and arguments." In the notes, she mentions many books and articles by postmodernist authors, and there and elsewhere she conscripts a ragbag of big names to the cause. These include Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, Thomas Kuhn, J. L. Austin, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. But it would be silly for a reader to feel challenged by a list of names and titles.

Chapter 3, "Belief and Resistance, a Symmetrical Account," is about the psychology of persuasion, here called "the analysis of the microdynamics and macrodynamics of belief." In spite of its title, the chapter is not

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symmetrical; symmetry is one of its topics, and Smith treats it as an important philosophical discovery. Like some ancient Greek mouthing "All is mud," she insists that symmetry is everywhere. Thus, if two people agree, then that is a symmetry; if they disagree, that's another symmetry; and, of course, there must be a third symmetry between the two symmetries. When seemingly strong evidence turns out to be weak, that's a symmetry; when weak evidence turns out to be strong, that's another; and again we find a super-symmetry between the symmetries. What of asymmetry? Well, "from another point of view," an asymmetry is actually a kind of symmetry . . .

Chapter 4, "Doing Without Meaning," reproduces a popular version of Derrida's "deconstruction" of language and his ideas about "the slippage of meaning."

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are the most intriguing because in them the author makes serious attempts to rebut the arguments of her opponents. The rebuttals fail for reasons that are comparatively simple but quite interesting. In chapter 5, "Unloading the Self-Refutation Charge," Smith defends Protagoras's relativistic thesis "man is the measure of all things" and tries to rebut arguments ("tricks") attributed to Plato and his commentator Myles Burnyeat. In "The Skeptic's Turn" (6) and "Arguing with Reason" (7) she repeats part of her attempted rebuttal but directs it at different opponents, one of whom is Jurgen Habermas.

Here is how the first part of her rebuttal runs. She agrees that "relativism is always (i.e., non-relatively) true" is self-refuting but says that it is not what relativists really mean. She looks at a supposed parallel: "all generalizations are false" is self-refuting but what is really meant is "most generalizations have exceptions," which is perfectly all right. What then does the relativist really mean? Smith suggests that he really means "*it appears to me* that relativism is always true" (italics hers). Although this revised version is not self-refuting (as far as I can see), it still won't do. Why not? Because what seems to be the case to the speaker is also believed by her to be self-refuting. That's to say, the revised version, when stated in full, is "it appears to me that relativism is always true, i.e., that that self-refuting statement is always true." Thus, it's an example of the well-known paradox "I believe p and p is false," sometimes called Moore's Paradox after G. E. Moore.

In another attempted rebuttal, Habermas and others are accused of repeatedly assuming what is to be proven, or begging the question. Begging the question is a term of traditional logic ("logicism"), so it is not surprising that Smith doesn't really know how to handle it. Habermas and others hold that the relativist's *own speech acts* (performances) depend on the essential nature of assertion. For instance, the relativist cannot make her points against the objectivist unless she surreptitiously accepts the rules of logic and the true/false dichotomy. According to Habermas, as quoted and then paraphrased by Smith, these considerations "revive the transcendental mode of justification" and provide objective theories with "a non-deductive but inescapable mode of proof." Smith raises no objections to the idea that the suggested mode of proof is non-deductive but insists that it is not inescapable. It is not inescapable because (she thinks) it can be shown to beg the question.

Now, begging the question ("p, therefore p"), though useless, is certainly deductively valid. And no argument can be deductively valid and also not deductively valid. So no argument can both beg the question and also fail to be deductively valid. So if Habermas and others have indeed produced a non-deductive mode of proof they most certainly have not begged any questions. Moreover, contra Smith, there can be no infinite regress of question-begging once the first accusation of that error falls to the ground.

Another rebuttal goes like this. It is said that the relativist's own speech acts depend on the very logical norms she thinks she is

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rejecting; she has to employ and appeal to these norms while trying to deny they exist. Smith accepts that in seeking to expose the wrongness of traditional logic the relativist does indeed assume certain logical norms. But (she says) her assumption is different from the assumptions made by her opponents. Both sides ". . . assume, in the sense of *appeal to*, pretty much the same logical *rules* [but they] conceptualize those rules and their operation in radically different ways . . . more or less same *rules*, more or less same *uses*, radically different conceptualizations. . . ." (italics mine).

What does this mean? I take it to mean that people can use the same rules and yet have different opinions about the status of those rules. What then is the status of logic according to the relativist? Ms. Smith tells us many times that her opponents' views on the matter are "contestable" and "contested" but gives no positive account of her own. Then again, the ownership of a "radically different conceptualization" doesn't amount to much if it makes no difference to the rules one uses. It's just a bit of pointless decoration. The vague qualifications ("pretty much the same," "more or less the same") are also pointless. Unless the point is to pull some wool over the eyes of the readers.

Smith claims that a belief in objectivity results from merely optional ways of using language. Traditional education trains students in an optional "logicism" involving the idea that assertion does not normally have to be qualified: but people can also be taught how to write and debate using the linguistic conventions of relativistic postmodernism in which every statement is qualified (or assumed to be).

That postmodernist linguistic conventions can be taught is indeed true; perhaps Smith herself was taught them when a college student. Nevertheless being taught how to speak a postmodernist version of one's native tongue is not like learning ordinary informal logic. Ordinary informal logic, the language of objective truth and falsehood, is not taught in the academies but absorbed in childhood. It is absorbed as the child learns how to cope with reality; with parents and siblings and pets, with standing up and falling over, with roads and sidewalks, with food and drink, with fire; and later with items like money, and timetables, and friendship, and enmity, and so on. The word *assertion* isn't a piece of verbal elastic which can be given any old rubbery postmodernist sense; *au contraire*, it denotes a human activity which meshes with all our other activities. That is the nature of assertion, and it helps to explain why the linguistic conventions of relativism do not and cannot mesh with other human activities. College students can be taught to talk in a postmodern manner, but they cannot be taught to *live* in ways that would accord with that language, those supposed beliefs. They cannot be taught to *behave* as relativists or constructivists or Derrideans.

Why not? Well, to begin with, in the conversations of ordinary life you can't keep qualifying everything you say. Qualifications like "I think so but you might not" deny responsibility for the reliability of what is said, and sooner or later, in real life, responsibility has to be accepted. Sooner or later, in real life, "I think so" has to be followed by "but let's find out for sure." Then again, a professor can happily deliver lectures all about the "the slippage of meaning" and the impossibility of truth and knowledge, but, when she leaves the classroom and pins up a reading list, or signs a contract, or writes to a publisher, or orders a meal, or chooses between pills marked "aspirin" and bottles marked "arsenic," or performs any one of a million other everyday actions, she is forced to rely on the non-slippage of meaning, on the contents of assertions and on the nature of assertion as such. She can do no other: in the real world her projects (and in some cases even her safety) will depend on the truth and reliability of what she hears and reads and signs and says.

Let's return to the question as to whether relativists can engage in intellectual debate. They do; but can they? And how can they?

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Smith's own debating moves are instructive because they show that objectivism is unavoidable.

It is well known that, when Mao Tse-tung tried to abolish the concept of moral obligation, he introduced the idea of political correctness as a kind of substitute. The notion of political correctness soon acquired all the force of moral obligation (and more—old-style immorality didn't lead straight to the concentration camp). Somewhat similarly, Smith rejects the *words* true and false but surreptitiously retains the *concepts* by embodying them in a substitute terminology. She replaces the word *true* with: valid, effective, coherent, relevant, sensitive, progressive, accurate, serviceable, conceptually congenial (I just love "conceptually congenial"). For the word *false* we get: confused, empty, dubious, doubtful, tendentious, contestable, and inaccurate. Admittedly, the substitutes are used in a pretty cloudy way but it's worth remembering that if they are to be defined at all, then some of them—the words *accurate*, *inaccurate*, and *valid*, for instance—can, and must, be defined in terms of truth and falsity.

Smith tells us that, when relativists engage in debate and try to effect change, they do so by "giving *evidence* of the *undesirable* results of status quo practices . . . pointing out the *probable results* of reform . . . pointing out that [their] analyses are relevant to the listener's experience" (italics mine) and by appealing to the listener's self-interest. But these are arguments of a kind that might easily be produced by an objectivist utilitarian philosopher—a rather worldly one. Smith also tells us about the way she thinks relativists would deal with propaganda which denies the Holocaust. They would engage in

> . . . the *gathering*, *analysis*, labeling and public exhibition of *original documents and photographs*, the development and public dissemination of vivid narratives incorporating *exact descriptions* of circumstantial *details*, the production, citation and *credentialing of survivors and other participants* . . . [italics mine].

But these activities are typical of ordinary objective historical research. True, they have been dollied up a bit in Smith's account, no doubt because she lives in the cultural world recommended by Richard Rorty, a world of TV docudramas. Note, though, that she wants all the docudramas and exhibitions to be *exact*, and *detailed*, and based on physical *evidence* and on the statements of "credentialized" (i.e., genuine) witnesses whose "citations" (i.e., assertions) can be trusted.

Professor Smith says absurd things about philosophical objectivists. They are represented as angry, depressed, frightened, perplexed, driven to awful self-doubt, and struck down by a weird new kind of mania. Who are these people? Some are figments of the imagination, the straw men of classical logic; others are naked because Smith has surreptitiously stolen their clothes.

Postwar solipsisms

Bernhard Schlink The Reader. Translated by Carol Brown Janeway. Pantheon, 219 pages, $21

Grete Weil Last Trolley from Beethovenstraat. Translated by John Barrett. Godine, 162 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Tess Lewis

The Holocaust, quite rightly, remains the defining event in the lives of several generations of Europeans, especially, of course, among Germans. While many choose to remain silent about the degree of their own or their family's participation in or resistance to the Nazi regime, ever more fictional dramatizations of that nation's struggle with collective guilt roll off the presses. The scale, like the horror, of this murderous bureaucracy defies even the most powerful imaginations, and few of the imaginations that grapple with this issue in fictional form are adequate to the task. Equally disturbing, many critics are reluctant to point out such

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novels' flaws or are simply blinded to them by the topic's sensitive nature.

Two of the post-Holocaust novels recently translated for US readers have long been available in Europe, where they were anointed with the usual collections of superlatives. Grete Weil's *Last Trolley from Beethovenstraat* was first published in Germany in 1963, while Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, a relative newcomer, first appeared in Switzerland in 1995. Here their reception has been more tempered: generally positive with an occasional qualified reservation. Yet both fall far short of their aspirations. Instead of characters confronting moral issues of overwhelming complexity, we have two protagonists wallowing self-indulgently in their own suffering and, vicariously, in that of others.

Andreas, the once-promising but chronically blocked German poet in *Last Trolley from Beethovenstraat*, remains mired in the war. Now, years later, he cannot write anything because of a "wildly exaggerated desire to be true" that consists of a refusal to acknowledge any truth that does not begin with the deportation of the Jews. So Andreas spends his time laying blame upon his wife, a survivor of Auschwitz, his willfully ignorant parents, and mankind in general.

He himself spent the war years in relative safety. With the help of a doctor friend and a weak heart, Andreas managed to evade active military service and was stationed in Amsterdam to write propagandistic cultural dispatches for a major German newspaper. Every night, he heard the commotion of crowds of people scrambling into trolleys on the street below his window. At first, he thought he was hallucinating and consulted a "nerve" doctor, Max Rosenbusch. No, this Jewish psychiatrist assured him, he was not going crazy. Each night exactly four hundred Jews—no more, no less—were crammed into trolley cars on Beethovenstraat and taken "East" to an uncertain, but surely dangerous, future. Dr. Rosenbusch refused Andreas's offer for help, but Andreas did rescue the doctor's son, Daniel, during a later round-up along with Sabine Lisser, a photographer who lived in his building. For over a year they hid in his apartment. Sabine and Daniel could not have been more different. Daniel was an extraordinarily beautiful, intelligent, and thoughtful seventeen-year-old. Sabine, a bit older, was brash, vulgar, annoying, and unappealing.

Gradually and platonically, Andreas fell in love with Daniel. Unable to bear his confinement, or Sabine's endless, grating chatter, Daniel bleached his hair and joined the Resistance. He was caught when his cousin Susanne unintentionally led the Gestapo to a list of twenty-four Resistance fighters' addresses. Susanne was sent to Auschwitz; Daniel, to Mauthausen. Only Susanne returned, looking like a "ragged, half-starved Arab boy." Andreas first mistakes her for Daniel, then marries her although he can neither forgive her for "betraying" Daniel, nor, later, when she has regained her figure, for no longer looking like him.

Despite an occasional twinge of conscience, Andreas is unshakably self-aggrandizing and self-righteous. He feels that he is the true victim of the war. He cannot separate his personal loss, his artistic impotence, and his latent pedophilia—in his only postwar therapeutic session he recounts a voyeuristic encounter in Northern Africa with an adolescent brother and sister as if it were a reunion with Daniel—from historical tragedy.

Weil's intention may have been to demonstrate that even some of those Germans who saved Jews from the Nazis did so for their own selfish ends. Born in Germany in 1906, Grete Weil spent the war years underground in Holland, so she is certainly aware of the ambivalence felt by many well-intentioned and courageous people. Yet her presentation of these moral complexities in *Last Trolley from Beethovenstraat* is too simplistic. Andreas comes off as a petulant, spoiled child rather than a thoughtful, responsible adult. The ethical quandaries he is meant to illustrate are muddled by his lack of moral imagination and self-pitying complaints about his lack of artistic success or emo-

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tional satisfaction. Andreas's encounter with evil has left him incapable of feeling, and, it seems, equally incapable of thinking. Weil's predilection for empty grandiosities exacerbates the novel's weaknesses: "He smiled deceitfully, the suicidal smile of an immoralist who is defending the thesis that suicide is impermissible on moral ground." Or, when Daniel bleaches his hair: "The idea of salvation through transfiguration foretold disaster."

While Andreas is eagerly ascribing guilt to those around him, the protagonist of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* avidly seeks to appropriate as much of it as he can. As a fifteen-year-old student, Michael Berg was seduced by Hanna Schmitz, an emotionally reserved but sexually passionate thirty-six-year-old streetcar conductor with a taste for uniforms. After more than a year of highly ritualized, almost daily trysts—Michael read to her, Hanna bathed him, then bed—she suddenly disappeared. Michael suffers from this abandonment for years, becoming aloof, arrogant, and disaffected. He does not see her again until he is in law school attending the trial of some female concentration camp guards of which Hanna is one.

The horror of Hanna's hidden past sends Michael into an orgy of questioning:

> Why does what was beautiful suddenly shatter in hindsight because it concealed dark truths? . . . Sometimes the memory of happiness cannot stay true because it ended unhappily. Because happiness is only real if it lasts forever? Because things always end painfully if they contained pain, conscious or unconscious, all along? But what is unconscious, unrecognized pain?

And on, and on, for paragraphs. Michael's questions, earnest, sophomoric, rhetorical, clichéd, are a constant bass-tone underscoring the denouement, and they are not limited to the particular. Should the spirit or the letter of the law be applied? he asks. If children love their parents, are they "irrevocably complicit" in their elders' crimes? Are we responsible for those we love? What should his generation do with the knowledge of their parents' past?

Still another host of questions crowds in upon him when he recognizes Hanna's other, equally protected secret: she is illiterate. Although many of her idiosyncrasies are thus explained, her behavior continues to puzzle him: why does she not admit her illiteracy to the court, especially since it would show that some of the charges against her are impossible, and others highly mitigated? Should he inform the judge of her secret? Is one allowed to act in the best interest of others against their wishes?

Michael's father had lectured on Spinoza (and thereby lost his university position during the war), so Michael consults him on this last question. He interprets his father's abstract answer about the freedom and dignity of the individual as a dispensation from involving himself in Hanna's defense. Hanna is sentenced to life imprisonment. After a failed marriage, Michael begins reading books for her into a tape recorder.

Years later, Hanna's sentence is commuted, but Schlink spares himself the task of dramatizing her encounter with Michael by having her commit suicide the day before her release. Michael does visit her cell, however, where he learns that she taught herself to read by laboriously following his readings line by line in the appropriate books. Whereas he had stuck to the classics—Homer, Chekhov, etc.—she had immersed herself in the literature of the camps—Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jean Améry, Rudolf Hess's autobiography, Hannah Arendt on Eichmann. For once, Michael does not ask the obvious question: what was her reaction to the victims' accounts?

Lists of questions and occasional speculation do not constitute a serious examination of moral dilemmas, especially when the questions have been asked many times before. In addition, Michael Berg in *The Reader*, like Andreas in *Last Trolley from Beethovenstraat*, cannot rise above his disap-

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pointment in love, but considers his sorrow emblematic of his country's fate. "How," he asks, "could it be a comfort that the pain I went through because of my love for Hanna was, in a way, the fate of my generation, a German fate, and that it was only more difficult for me to evade, more difficult for me to manage than for others." But he finds comfort and atonement in the fact that he is "guilty of having loved a criminal." While these novels may enlarge our view of the human heart's self-involvement, they hardly deepen our understanding of the Holocaust and its repercussions. In fact, we are left with the uncomfortable sense that the Holocaust has been used less than responsibly: as a prop to heighten these novels' emotional tension and moral seriousness, rather than as an integral part of the whole.

Spinoza could have offered some relevant advice instead of merely serving as a narrative hook for Schlink. In his *Ethics*, he wrote, "Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it." More clarity and precision in the definition of these protagonists and the moral dilemmas in which they are meant to be trapped might not have helped Michael and Andreas, but certainly would have made for better novels.

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Notebook

Letter from London: Charles Saatchi's YBAs

by David Cohen

Should Myra Hindley hang? Most Britons would probably answer yes to the woman and no to the painting. The painting in question is by Marcus Harvey, who has used a child-sized cast of a hand to print on a giant, sinisterly mesmerizing canvas the black, white, and grey pixel marks of the instantly familiar police mugshot of Britain's most notorious child murderer. *Myra*, four meters high and almost as wide, has become a talking point of "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection"—the blockbuster show, at London's Royal Academy of Arts through December 28, that was always destined to live up to its name in tabloid terms.

The Moors Murders took place in Yorkshire in the early 1960s. The victims—all children—were slowly tortured (their death throes recorded on a tape machine) and then buried in the moors by Hindley and her associate, Ian Brady. Most of the bodies were never found. Hindley has been incarcerated ever since and, despite religious conversion and evident signs of remorse, stands little chance of reprieve: her case still arouses such strong emotion. Indeed, Hindley and her crimes remain an occasion for front-page news stories on the slightest pretexts. Some months ago the director of a child charity, Kidscape, called for a public boycott of the exhibition if the Royal Academy allowed the picture to be shown. Meanwhile, the mother of one of Hindley's victims, Mrs. Winnie Johnson, pleaded for the offending item to be removed. When the academicians voted at the eleventh hour to keep it in, three of their number, sculptor Michael Sandle and painters Gillian Ayres and Craigie Aitchison, threw in the towel. "I am afraid the RA has done something bordering on evil" Sandle wrote in a newspaper article explaining his resignation.

The manner in which *Myra* has galvanized public opinion is entirely symptomatic of this aptly named exhibition, which has done little to prevent itself from being presented in the media as a freak show. Both in execution and intention, Harvey's painting is almost a caricature of the YBA aesthetic: "strong stuff," it is abjection on ice, a cool, calculated manipulation of image and response, an art of nonchalance and "attitude." Of course, such catch-all phrases leave out some individuals in the show—probably the best—but a kind of designer degeneration links Harvey to the ring-leader of the group, Damien Hirst, with Hirst's animals pickled in formaldehyde. It also groups Harvey with the Chapman brothers' pedophilic mannequins, with the cast self-portrait by Marc Quinn in the artist's own blood, and with the puerile sexual obsessions of Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin.

Just as *Myra* epitomizes Brit Pack aesthetics, so too, once it left Marcus Harvey's studio, its fortunes have read like a fable of YBA promotion. Charles Saatchi purchased the piece after staging his exhibition of Harvey at his private museum in North

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London. As the artist's dealer Jay Jopling never exhibited *Myra* at his White Cube gallery, "Sensation" was its first public outing. And yet, *Myra* had a distinguished career in the media well before the show opened. It was reproduced when Saatchi bought it. So, too, when the Academy announced "Sensation" back in February, although it is highly unusual to specify at so early a date which individual images are going into a show: by that stage, the artist line-up had yet to be finalized. Again the image was splashed across the newspapers when the Kidscape story broke. One wonders how the photo first entered the public domain. The private acquisition of a painting by a collector only becomes public news if someone wants it to.

More to the point, one marvels at the Academy's response to the controversy. It sent out a press release insisting on the high moral purpose of the picture, arguing that the Academy—which is not government funded—is a charity and thus not driven by commercial gain, and stating that they would not be rushed into decisions about the inclusion of the work. It actually made its decision, in a vote of its hundred-strong membership, on the eve of the show's opening, as if to bleed as much publicity from the event as possible. As for profits, that was a moot point. The institution has had an extremely troubled time recently, suffering from a financial scandal, a deficit crisis, even a fire. At short notice, it had to plug a gap in its exhibitions program (it was to have taken its flamboyant exhibitions secretary Norman Rosenthal's modernism show from Berlin, but the various London venues intended to host that survey could not raise the necessary sponsorship). The truth is that publicity-grabbing "young" art from a single private collector, himself a magnet for media attention, offered an irresistible quick fix, a cheap and, if cleverly marketed, lucrative stop-gap show. The resignations, decorative frills on a *succès de scandale*, were merely indicative of impotent rage, of the extent to which Rosenthal has made the Royal Academy his private fiefdom. Sandle has complained that, thanks to a disorganized membership and a byzantine rule book, Rosenthal (supposedly an employee of the academicians) is able to lead the institution by the nose.

The acquisitive eye of advertising mogul Charles Saatchi roves too widely to deduce from his eclectic holdings any notion of "ad-man" taste. It would be a mockery of art criticism to claim some common denominator between the American blue-chip minimalism he was encouraged to start collecting by his first wife, Doris Lockhart; the School of London realism of Freud and Auerbach he himself preferred; the New York neo-expressionism of Schnabel and Clemente; the new-generation British sculpture of the 1980s from the likes of Deacon and Woodrow; the works by Alex Katz he has recently acquired by the baker's dozen; and, lastly, if most notoriously, the YBAs. And yet there are uncanny coincidences of ethos and aura between the profession which has furnished Mr. Saatchi with a fortune to lavish on art, and the new generation now virtually synonymous with his name. The cool school has not pioneered a style of its own so much as knowingly distilled various avant-garde movements of the preceding generation—conceptualism, minimalism, pop—imbuing the retro fusion with a distinctly British, yobbish, post-punk "attitude." In other words, just like Mr. Saatchi's trade, their art is cannibalistic, ephemeral, gratuitous.

However one rates the individual artists, there is no question that, for relatively small sums, Mr. Saatchi has purchased the defining images of the young school: Damien Hirst's pickled shark (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*), Rachel Whitebread's cast in a solid concrete block of the space inside a room (*Ghost*), Tracey Emin's appliqued tent (*Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*), Dinos and Jake Chapman's life-size shop mannequin transcription from Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra* (*Great Deeds Against the Dead*). To give him his due, Saatchi is the

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Barnes of Banality. Some, though, would object even to this epithet on the grounds that Dr. Barnes was a bona fide collector, whereas Mr. Saatchi gives many indications of being a glorified dealer. I once heard staff at the Tate Gallery affectionately refer to the original four-volume catalogue of the collection published in the mid-1980s, *Art in Our Times*, as *Exchange and Mart* (a small-ads paper), so few works in it are still in his possession.

While most of his stock of YBAs comes from debut shows or artists' studios (often purchased in bulk), one or two artists are under direct contract to produce work for him. Jenny Saville, who paints obese women in the style of Lucian Freud and then scratches feminist texts into the paint, is one. There is not a little irony in the fact that a political artist, whose work is so much about women's control of their bodies and the problematic identification of paint with possession, should bond herself to a capricious collector in an almost feudal arrangement. Recently, a solo exhibition offered to her by the Gagosian Gallery in New York was vetoed by her patron. This, coupled with the fact that several new paintings by her are being debuted in "Sensation," raises a very real concern about Mr. Saatchi's commercial intentions (it was he who proposed the loan of his collection to the RA). If Savilles quickly find their way afterward to other collections, the Royal Academy will have transformed its venerable galleries into a swank West End showroom. Unlike its own car-trunk-sale summer exhibitions, however, the RA won't even have the satisfaction of taking a commission. "Sensation," incidentally, is sponsored by Christie's.

But quite apart from the commercial problem, the RA has sold itself short in allowing the exhibition to take place at all in its present form. Even supposing that its members passionately believed in the value of the art on show, there is still no reason for limiting the selection to a single source with the intellectual and aesthetic restrictions this entails. It is true that some of their best shows are of private collections; as a non-lending venue the RA has to work harder to attract quality exhibitions than it does the general public. But with material as readily available as Brit Pack art—what artist or dealer wouldn't lend to a landmark show?—there seems to be no justification for making Mr. Saatchi the star.

The truth is that there was never any question of the Academy rising to the challenge of organizing its own survey of new art in Britain. The RA has failed miserably in its efforts to recruit, let alone represent, the best British painters and sculptors of the 1980s, depriving its audience of any glimpse of artists who emerged in that decade. This is even true of some quite remarkable figurative painters who are, incidentally, much closer in style and sensibility to the (silent, hoodwinked) majority of the Academy. It seems hypocritical, therefore, for the RA to leap-frog beyond these people to another generation on the spurious grounds that the YBAs enjoy more international approval and media hype. It all comes back to the quick fix—not just of gate revenue, but of novelty and youth. There is now the ungainly spectacle of aging pop artists (the likes of Allen Jones and Peter Blake, both active committee men at the RA) craving association with the YBAs. But their strategy has backfired: there has been a farcical, steady parade of young turks publicly turning down membership of the Academy even before waiting for the formality of actually being elected. Frankly, it's the drubbing the Academy deserves.

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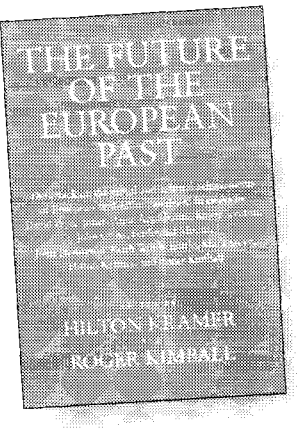

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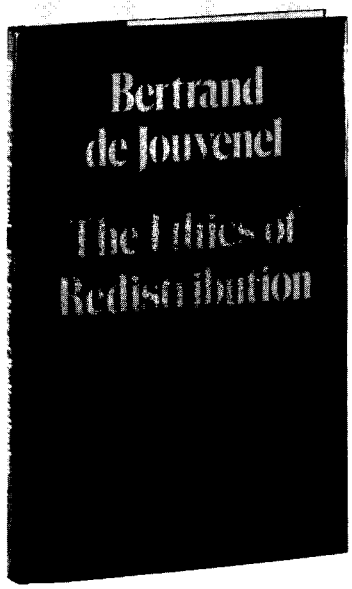

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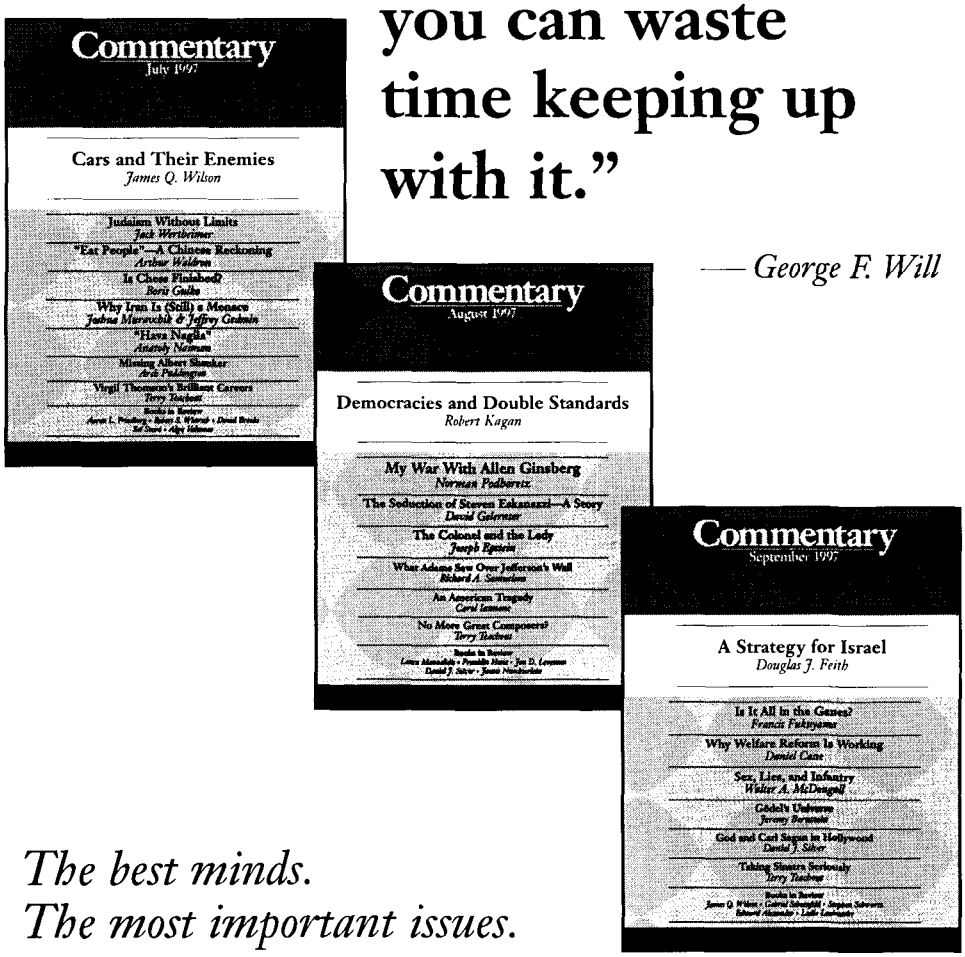

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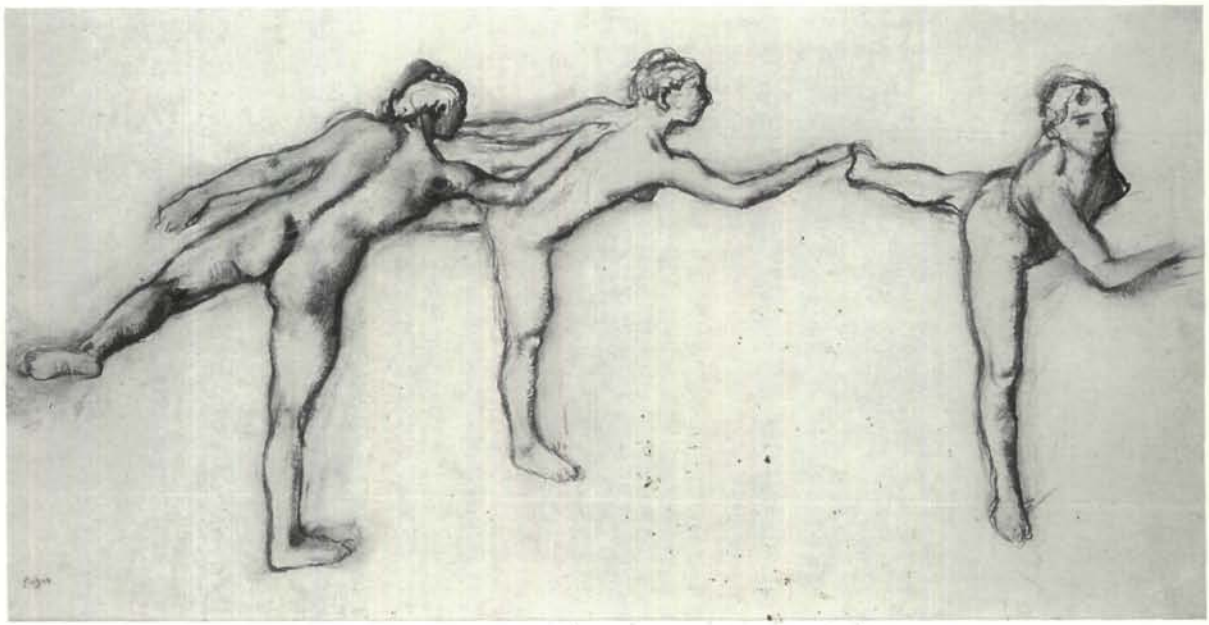

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